

Interview: Mayor of the Rytel village in 2015 - 2019

Tell us about the natural disaster you experienced?

S: We're going to talk about the disaster that happened on the 11th of August, 2017. People who live in this area call it the "Storm of the Century" and it is an accurate description for what happened here on that frightful day. There has never been such a devastating storm in recent history, which is evident in the fact that many of the destroyed trees were between 130-150 years old.

How was this catastrophe going?

S: These memories are not easy to forget, no matter how I try. Even with all the time that has passed and looking back at how far we have come, it just takes this simple question of recalling what happened on that terrible day, to bring all those memories flooding back in.

It was an extremely hot day and storm clouds were starting to gather in the evening, so it was not far-fetched to expect a storm quite soon. There was so much lightning, I likened it to the strobe lights in a disco, and the wind suddenly started blowing with a tremendous force. This sudden gale-force wind and explosion of lightning, definitely unnerved me. Later we would learn from storm chasers, that as many as 11 storms accumulated at the same time over Rytel. I recall that the World Athletics Championship was being broadcast on television, we were leading in the shotput and the final was going to be at 21h40. By this time, the storm was increasing and it was no surprise when the TV satellite signal was lost, as it often happens during thunderstorms. I decided to go and take a shower and no sooner had I finished, when there was a total electricity blackout, no lights or electricity.

Outside, the storm was in full swing. Wind gusts, measuring up to 180m/h drove rain forcefully from all directions, the closed garage door was ripped open what followed, is etched into my memory forever. For the first time in my life, I saw rain pouring in through ventilation hatches, fireplaces, not only vertically as usual, but even horizontally, streaming in through completely closed and secured windows by the bucket loads full. I was alone with 4 small children at the time and it was absolutely terrifying. We also witnessed our...springboard...through the window in the garden, there the one moment, solidly secured in the ground, and the next instant, it was gone.

We only dared to leave the house after about an hour after the storm had stopped and were dumbstruck to witness the devastation caused by the preceding 20-30 minutes.

What did you see?

S: The best way to describe it is that I felt as if the forest was crying. It was a disturbing sight. I saw hundreds of thousands of trees grotesquely broken and twisted, scattered everywhere. There was an eerie silence all around and to this day I can still smell the overwhelming scent of resin and burnt trees hanging heavily in the air. In a matter of approximately half an hour an area of between 14,000-16,000 thousand trees was completely wiped out. With the last few flashes of lightning fading in the distance, I stared out into the blackness at the few remaining trees, now smoldering red. The

epicenter of the storm seemed to be in the forest, the surrounding villages mostly suffered uprooted and broken trees.

How did the neighbors react to what they were seeing?

S: People were shocked by the sight of what had happened as they started to emerge from their houses and simply looked at each other in stunned disbelief. It was the first moment, then someone said: "Listen, come see what happened, doesn't anyone need help?"

We quickly realized that there might be survivors that need urgent help. We divided ourselves into small groups and decided to check the area and see what we could do to help. We very quickly realized that this was easier said than done. We could hardly walk a 100m, the whole area was obstructed by hundreds of uprooted, broken trees and snapped electricity poles were scattered all over with their electrical cables hanging loose.

Initially I was afraid of getting electrocuted and didn't want to pass anywhere near them. Only later did I learn that the electricity supply was immediately cut the moment they touched the ground.

To give you an idea; under the normal circumstances, it would take me about five minutes, at a leisurely pace, to reach my sisters' house, who also lives in Rytel. That day, it took me nearly two and a half hours to navigate a way to her.

We tried reaching her house a different way but it was also completely obstructed by massive 70 year old pine trees, scattered around in piles as if they were matchsticks in a game. Eventually we managed to make our way along the Brda river, sometimes wading through it. This part of the village seemed to be completely cut off from the rest and we walked through the streets calling out to see if anybody needed help. We urged people to shout out, use some kind of signal like a flashlight or even the light on their phones so we could get to them.

During this time, the mobile network was down and all transmitter batteries were dead. It would eventually take 21 days for all the houses electricity to be reconnected and phones and GPS devices started working only a week after that. The situation was unimaginable. In a time when we are so reliant on the ease of communication by phone, the simplest message informing about a meeting point or time or any sort of arrangement, would have to spread by word of mouth from one to the next. I'm still not sure how we managed it. The time just after the storm was chaotic, planning and executing rescue and clean-up operations was overwhelmingly difficult and people were struggling to comprehend what had happened.

People emerged from their homes on the Saturday morning in a state of shock. The helplessness and disbelief of what they were seeing was evident in the zombie-like state they were simply quietly walking around, trying to take in the total devastation all around them. I remember myself only coming around to the reality of the situation at around 14h15. It became evident that we had a mammoth task ahead of us and would have to work together like never before, if we were going to make it through the next couple of days.

The road you took – Road No. 22 from Rytel to the village of Jeziorki, where there is a Shell gas station, was completely blocked by trees. You can see that there is nothing there now - everything was one big windbreak.

You personally had two roles, one as a witness and one as a facilitator and organizer of aid and having to manage it all. What was it like? How did the emergency services work?

Yes, I had two roles. I started receiving phone calls about 10 minutes after the storm, everybody wanted information from me, their village mayor. Rytel has a population of 3000 people, so you can imagine that my phone was ringing non-stop. Additionally, from 1.15 a.m. I also started receiving calls from concerned parents regarding the situation at the scout camps near Rytel. They asked if I knew anything or about what had happened.

The only information I could get, was via two-way radios of the Voluntary Fire Service. I live very close to the unit, which is in the national fire-rescue system. I knew that all forces were drawn from Rytel. The firefighters who could leave Rytel were to head to the village of Suszek. There was a camp site there but I had no information about the situation, about the damage, casualties or injuries.

I asked for this information myself as I was inundated with phone calls. Someone from the village of Modrzejewo reporting a leak from a gas truck after a tree had fallen on it, asking what they should do. This is my profession, so I instructed this person accordingly - what to do and how to behave.

But next calls were like this: I no longer have a house, a person is calling me and says: Mayor, I no longer have a house.

I lost a roof, my horses escaped - the village is not typically agricultural, it has a tourist and holiday character.

There is no mention of the entire scale of the destruction in Rytel, but rather the destruction of several dozen houses. There is no mention of the destruction of 100 holiday homes which, according to the regulations, did not exist and were not eligible for aid. And if they didn't qualify, they weren't destroyed.

When these calls all started, it was at 1:30 a.m., I tried contacting the mayor of Czersk as Rytel is part of the Czersk commune but I was unable to get through to her. Czersk is a village-town commune. Then I called her deputy. I said that a disastrous storm had gone through Rytel (because the destruction was in a narrow strip (about 13 km wide) in the vicinity of Rytel) - you go one kilometer beyond Rytel and there is already a forest. The storm passed north towards Brusy, Kościerzyna.

It was impossible for me to try to explain the extent of the devastation we have suffered as he was unbelieving of the severity of the storm. He told me that where he was in Czersk, only 2 flowerpots were overturned during the storm.

I say: Mr. Mayor, a tragedy happened to us, about which I am not able to tell you in words.

He answers: I will inform Mrs Mayor and will act.

At approximately 3 o'clock, I received a short message from the Mayor asking me to let him know what the extent of the damage was. I reacted with laughter, but tears were still falling. I was very upset that someone downplayed this matter. They clearly had no idea of how dire and serious our situation was.

Saturday came and went quite fast but there was still no sign of rescue teams apart from our Volunteer Fire Service and State Fire Service from Chojnice. There was no crisis management center or information points. On the other hand, as the village mayor, I do not have the competence to set up a crisis management team, I could be an element of this staff if someone would allow me to do so, or asked me to do so (no auxiliary unit of the commune, i.e. the village council and the village mayor have no competences or obligation, according to the statute of the village council, to take any action in such situations. Of course, there is a provision that I should be available to the residents, but this is vague wording. There are no specific provisions, for example - to arrange a meeting with residents as soon as possible after the occurrence of a given event).

I was terribly helpless because I, as mayor of the village, had no authority or even the know-how of how to set up such support points. All I could do, was be there, be available to my fellow residents but unable to do much more. The only form of help was from our local Volunteer Fire Service and the State Fire Service of Chojnice.

We were able to arrange by word of mouth for the Sunday at 3pm. The holly masses held at 8, 10 and 11 helped a lot. More than 500 people attended and the cultural centers' s hall was bursting at the seams. I informed both Mrs Mayor and the commander of our Volunteer Fire Department about a meeting.

It's impossible to describe the mood at this meeting. Everybody felt completely powerless and overwhelmed.

There were many questions - what to do next, where to go, who to contact.

It completely missed my imagination of this meeting. We were all in agreement that we were in desperate need of intervention and assistance due to the severity of our situation because we would not be able to control it ourselves, only with the help of local fire brigade and the police. Hence, requests were made to the Mayor that she must notify the Voivode.

And the mayor said that she would call the voivode on Monday, so there were questions from the room whether the voivode was not answering on Sunday. In the meantime I did manage to make contact with a Parliament Members from the Bydgoszcz region and urged him to submit a letter to the Prime Minister, informing her about the scale of the damage. The media quickly became interested in the story, focusing especially on Suszek and the scout camps were where two girl scouts lost their lives - it was a huge tragedy. However, they were not really interested in reporting on the destruction and trauma we were faced with, and it was very important for me to raise public awareness throughout Poland as to what the reality of our circumstances were.

On August 15, we were very active, but the help was not always appropriate, as well as the interpretation of our needs - at various levels of local government - a big problem here were the political divisions had an impact on communication. We said not to focus on the political views but on the problem that befell the people down there.

We created a social committee to help organize a fundraiser within the Internal Affairs Ministry. At that time, the scale of aid and assistance being offered to us, was so immense that we were completely overwhelmed by the support we were receiving.

On the next street, there was a crisis team of the police and army. But we didn't communicate with each other at all. They did their job and we helped ordinary people. It led to mis-communication amongst civilians, the police and military crises teams. This often resulted in confusion in terms of what procedure or protocol to follow.

I recall a man that came to us, asking for help with the covering of his roof with a tarpaulin.

I advised him to approach the State Fire Service as they would be able to help him the best.

He replied that they had told him to call the 998 emergency crises number.

After connecting with the dispatcher in Chojnice, he was told:

"Why are you calling me? There is a crisis center in Rytel, right?"

And there is nothing to hide, it was only after the intervention of the then Prime Minister Mrs. Szydło, who visited us and enquired about our specific needs in order to assist us in the best way possible (she helped a little something - editorial note)

I said that this is not a conversation in front of cameras and microphones and it is better to talk outside the antenna. Then she took the phone number to my wife. After some time, a person delegated from the Prime Minister called and asked a few questions:

What is our biggest problem? What's happening? How can we help?

I explained that our biggest challenge was in ensuring efficient and proper communication amongst everyone involved in the rescue operation. Within an hour and a half, people from the fire brigade the police and the military arrived. We sat around a table discussing everything and agreed on the best way forward. A delegate was appointed to be the liaison between our center and the fire brigade.

We drew up lists of needs and help required for all affected and these were checked and verified by the fire brigade. This ranged from people needing actual help and perhaps not asking for it, to people asking for help with trivial and perhaps unimportant things at the time, like a damaged fence that a tree fell on.

At last the whole crisis management team started to function properly and run smoothly, it's just a pity that it took so long to get it all in place.

In what way did the members of the community help each other or, in other words, was that so-called interpersonal solidarity between people only for the time of crisis or has it survived to this day?

This outburst of interpersonal solidarity was enormous, but it did not come so suddenly.

In the past we have already initiated different social activities in Rytel in order to involve surrounding communities, which were becoming more and more popular. It started with the symbolic lighting of the Christmas tree lights in 2015 that was attended by about 30-50 people. In 2016 this number had grown to 300 people. We created opportunities to integrate the local communities on a social level at events like the celebration of St. Andrews Day and St. Nicholas Day.

After this incident, the unity and willingness between people to help each other, lasted for a long time. Looking back over the past two and a half years this solidarity continues, maybe not as much as during the catastrophe (as on August 11) - but such moments are worth living for. People still want to take part in various initiatives.

How quickly was it possible to rebuild Rytel?

Fortunately the whole of Rytel is rebuilt now, many buildings have new roofs and three houses have been built from scratch. It took the committee three months of intense and very hard work to overcome the first stages of the damage.

We received sufficient financial aid and so many donations in so many different forms, it was actually difficult to calculate. Before, I would count gloves by pair, now we were receiving boxes of gloves. We were asked if we needed cement and toilet paper, of course we replied that we did. Soon after, a truckload with 16 pallets of toilet paper was delivered to us as well as 500 tons of cement! A meat processing plant near Warsaw donated 5 tons of meat, logistically it became a small nightmare. Therefore I organized a meeting with village mayors from the communes of Czersk, Choince and Brusy to determine their specific needs and on the basis of the list, I distributed the products to where it was needed.

Another necessity we had was for fuel, as all the power generators run on gasoline and diesel. After only two phone calls to Lotos S.A, we received an email half an hour later from them notifying us that there was 10,000 litres of fuel available for us at their station in Czersk, it was absolutely incredible. We only had to sign one document and then we were able to distribute the fuel to where necessary.

A wholesalers of drinks and alcoholic beverages donated 8 pallets of energy drinks to us as they were unable to sell them because of their obscene packaging.

We also received enormous financial aid, several million zlotys, which had to be allocated in an appropriate and fair manner. When the OSB boards came, we also had a few attempts to extort them.

Not wanting to run a supermarket-like warehouse, we developed an organized distribution system.

People called us describing their needs; one hundred meters of mineral wool, one hundred square meters of OSB roof protection boards, material for walls, utility rooms etc. These people and their needs had to be verified as actual, in order to prevent dishonesty.

Unfortunately, there was jealousy between people in some instances. For example, when one family gets a new energy-efficient house with a heat pump worth about PLN 400,000 zlotys, people are quick to say that this family did not deserve it. I then replied that perhaps this family did not deserve this house the most, but definitely they needed it the most.

We tried our best in following the best process in the distribution of aid, but obviously not to everyone's satisfaction. Personally, I was accused of selling fuel and of embezzling millions of zlotys. I also experienced interpersonal dislike, several denunciations were made on me. There was an article in a recent newspaper, claiming that there is still an amount of PLN 108,000 in the associations' account and we refuse to help people.

I tried to explain the three stages in which help was allocated to those in need.

The first stage was to help people to remove the effects of the storm, for people who had their homes destroyed.

The second stage for the owners of private forests (we have 400 ha of such forests in Rytel), these activities were divided into two parts: the first one concerned forest cleaning and tidying up, after six months we paid the second tranche for the purchase of seedlings and afforestation (this division made us sure that money will not be consumed).

The third stage is the renovation of the common areas - greenery in Rytel. This smallest amount of 100,000 zlotys was allocated to the park renovation. We had a problem with this, because our actions had to be preceded by the consent of the conservator of monuments located in Gdańsk - which took a while.

Revitalization was only carried out in 2019. We managed to secure the money for investments thanks to the resolution we adopted in 2018.

Unfortunately there were cases of people abusing the system. For example, one family's house and furnace was damaged during the storm and they were asked to have a list of the necessary items and an estimation of the cost prepared by a plumber. It was discovered that they added eight additional radiators on their list. So we asked whether eight radiators were also damaged during that time?

Do you now feel better prepared for a similar catastrophe and what have you learned from this disaster?

Yes, I do feel more prepared. I have a power generator now, a fuel supply and a saw, although there is no forest around us at the moment, there are still some damaged trees around. I also always have an adequate supply of drinks.

I was the face of aid during the disaster Rytel, but I have to say, that after my experience, if another catastrophe occurred, God forbid, e.g. the Brda River would flood - I would think twice about becoming publically involved again. There will always be individuals wanting to point a finger at someone for something, especially when it involves money. People also need to be educated that there are people who are social activists, who don't do things for their own benefit, and people often do not understand or appreciate this.

Do other people, for example your neighbors, feel prepared for a possible catastrophe?

I will answer it through an example of local governments. Only one local government from Chodzież came to us to learn first-hand how to deal with disaster recovery. The Staroste brought their heads and mayors, the commandant of the fire brigade, police, and school principals to visit us - in total a delegation of twenty-one people. They spent the whole day with us, talking to starostes and village mayors in the area. They said that there is no better school than the observation of field activities - but this was only an exception.

You mentioned that there was no communication and it was difficult to inform other residents about the meeting after the disaster. Do you now have an assembly, help or information point that

will be a meeting point in the future? When something happens, do I know that I have to be in a given place as soon as possible and can I expect some help or information there?

Yes, it is at the fire station of the Volunteer Fire Service in Rytel, and all the local people know it. It is a large two-story building with its own generator, so I know that there will be water and electricity should something similar happen in the future. This is also the basic information point. Various warning systems have also been developed enabling us to get information on the phone about what is happening and a TUR system was created by the Storoście's office and is based on the operation of walkie-talkies. The crisis management centers of the Chojnice county are connected with each other with this system, along with the hospital and the county's fire brigade headquarters. In my opinion, local governments should constantly develop communication tools that are not based on GSM.

The rules for the organization of scout camps have also changed, having to notify the fire brigade of each camp.

It is unfortunate that the organizers of the scout camp that was destroyed during the storm in Suszek are now facing prosecution charges, and there will be a court hearing regarding their failure to fulfill their obligations. The doctor who attended to the first triage of these injured children told me that they were only able to reach the camp after 5 and a half hours. You can imagine the scale of devastation, travelling only 3 miles from Rytel to the campsite in this time. He stated that when they reached the camp at dawn, the children were dressed in dry clothes, sitting around a campfire while the scout leader was playing guitar and singing to them. The injured children and those in a more serious condition were already properly "sorted" and were lying. When the rescuers came, the commandant told them what was wrong with each of these people, that this one had such a fracture, and that one had such a fracture. It is to be judged, not that a gale came that did what it wanted. On the other hand, were they supposed to organize a scout camp on the field or on asphalt?