

THEY DID NOT TEACH ME THIS AT SCHOOL

Alina Suchanski writes about the wartime deportations from Eastern Poland to Soviet Union and how some deportees ended up in New Zealand.

From Poland to New Zealand

I was born and raised in post-WW2 socialist Poland. At school we were fed information about the atrocities committed during the war by Nazi Germany in Poland. So successfully was the message "Never to forget" imprinted in our minds, that well into my adult life I still had nightmares about the war. To this day hearing the German language sends shivers down my spine.

Conveniently, the crimes committed by the Soviet Union were left out of our school curriculum. It took a journey to the end of the world and several years of living in the antipodes before I learned about the tragedy of the thousands of Polish people who in September 1939 happened to be on the east side of the Soviet-German frontier established by the Ribbentrop-Molotov treaty.

No history textbook or teacher told me about the Soviet invasion on Poland on 17 September 1939 and the mass deportations that followed it. First on the Soviet secret police (NKVD) black list were the high ranking officers of the Polish army, reserves and police. These people were singled out and either shot on the spot or arrested. 15,000 of them were placed in one of three POW camps in Ostaszkow, Starobielsk and Kozielsk, never to be seen alive again.

Five months later deportations of civilians began. It is estimated that in 1940-42 up to 1.7 million Polish citizens of various faiths and ethnicities from eastern Poland (the "Kresy", or Borderlands) were killed, repressed or deported to prisons, forced labour camps (GULAGs) and "special resettlement" places in Siberia, Kazakhstan and Soviet Asia.

There were several waves of deportations, all carried out with systematic, cold blooded precision. The first one was on the 10th of February 1940. On that day my stepfather, Tony Leparowski, then only 4 years old, was scooped from his bed and put on a train which carried him away forever from life as he knew it. He shared the fate of thousands of others, who for nearly two years fought hunger, freezing temperatures and diseases in remote, God-forsaken places in the Soviet Union.

Then, an unexpected turn of events brought hope and freedom to the Poles. In June 1941 Germany attacked the Soviet Union breaking the non-aggression pact they signed in 1939. The Nazi "blitzkrieg" was progressing fast, causing huge losses in the Soviet ranks. The Soviets, who for two years acted as Hitler's chief accomplices, now turned for Polish assistance. General Sikorski signed an agreement with Stalin to release the Poles scattered across the Soviet Union and to form a Polish Army under General Wladyslaw Anders.

When news of the "Amnesty" reached the labour camps and prisons, an exodus of Polish people started. They all headed south, to Uzbekistan, where the Polish Army was forming. Many did not survive this long and arduous journey. Some were intercepted en route by the Soviets and forced to work in Uzbek kolkhozes.

In 1942 the Anders' Army moved to Persia to join the Allies. Some 116,000 soldiers with their families and thousands of orphans were evacuated across the Caspian Sea. In 1944 the Polish Army joined the British Forces and spent the rest of the war fighting the Germans in the Middle East, North Africa and Italy. Their families and thousands of orphaned children were left stranded in Persia. Gradually they were moved to Polish camps in the Middle East, Africa, India, Mexico and New Zealand. As most of these refugees were from the eastern lands lost to the USSR, and had suffered under the communists, they did not return to Poland and eventually settled in the West.



Polish Children in Persia, c. 1942

It is estimated that perhaps half of the deportees died - either during their actual deportation, their experience as exiles and prisoners in extremely harsh conditions of hard labour, climate, disease and starvation, or their attempted journey out of the USSR after their release. The real numbers will never be known.

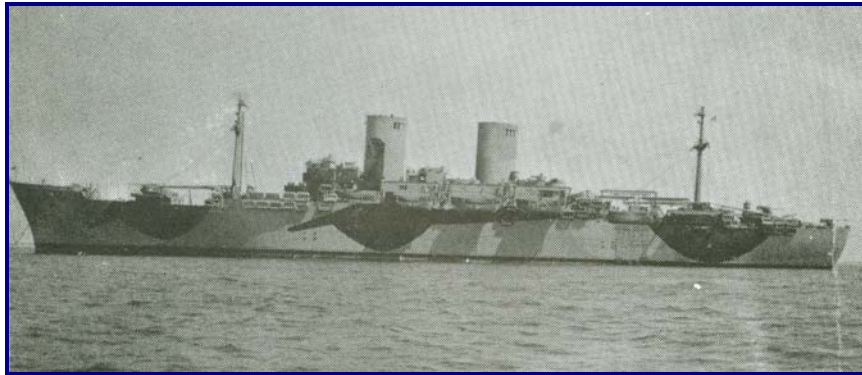
Some were not able to leave the Soviet Union for Poland until after the war. Many of these joined the Soviet-sponsored Polish Army fighting the Germans under General Zygmunt Berling, while their families continued eking out a subsistence in Soviet settlements. Having lost their lands in the Kresy, most of these Poles were relocated after the war to the lands "regained" from Germany in the west.

Others remained in the Soviet Union, and their descendants live there to this day - struggling to retain their Polish ethnicity in places such as Kazakhstan.

The circumstances of the odyssey and tragic history of the Polish citizens under Soviet occupation during the war was hushed up by the Allies during the war to protect the reputation of the Soviet Union, an important ally in the war against the Nazis. They were not only deported from their lands but also deported from History.

Polish Children's Camp in Pahiatua, New Zealand

One large group of Polish orphans and their caretakers were invited to New Zealand by the then Prime Minister, Peter Fraser. On 1 November 1944, 733 children, mostly orphans and half orphans arrived in Wellington Harbour after a month-long journey on an American troopship the "General Randall". Some 100 adults - teachers, doctors and administrators - accompanied the children.



The American troopship General Randall which brought the Polish children to New Zealand

They were taken by train to a small North Island township of Pahiatua where a camp was established to give a temporary home for the children. The entrance to the new home read "Polish Children's Camp in Pahiatua".

As far as the children were concerned this was their little Poland.



Polish Children's Camp in Pahiatua, 1948

The children were educated in Polish on the assumption that they would return to their homeland at the end of the war. This was not to be. As the borders of Poland shifted to the west, not only did the children lose their homes, their land and possessions were confiscated, their families either murdered or transported to Russia, but also the new Poland became a puppet state of communist Russia. In consideration of this the New Zealand government gave the children a choice of returning to Poland or staying in New Zealand permanently. Only about 10% returned to Poland, the majority chose to settle in New Zealand.

It is interesting to note that in 1947 and again in 1948 the communist Polish Government in Warsaw demanded that the children be returned to Poland, but the New Zealand Government refused.

The children were now being prepared for their permanent life in New Zealand. The teaching of English, previously only available to older children as a second language, was intensified and gradually the older children were given the opportunity to enter Catholic boarding schools.

The Pahiatua Polish Children's camp was finally disbanded in 1949 and the children were sent to private Catholic schools throughout New Zealand. Accommodation was provided in boarding houses in Wellington and Hawera.

Sixty years later the survivors, now parents and grandparents themselves are still enjoying a good life in New Zealand.

Sources:

Kresy-Siberia Group website <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Kresy-Siberia/>

"Pahiatua Children" by Jan Roy-Wojciechowski published on the website of the Polish Consulate in Auckland www.polishheritage.co.nz

Further information:

Books:

Krystyna Skwarko „The Invited” Millwood Press, Wellington 1974. Full title “The Invited – The story of 733 Polish Children who grew up in New Zealand”.

Norman Davis “God's Playground – A History of Poland Volume II 1795 to the present”, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981

Maria van der Linden “An Unforgettable Journey”, Dunmore Press Ltd., 1992

Eugenia Sendek-Biliczka “W Sowieckim Raju””, Kurier Press, Perth, Western Australia 1990

John Roy-Wojciechowski and Alan Parker, “A Strange Outcome, The Remarkable Survival Story of a Polish Child”, Penguin Books Auckland, NZ; 2004

A collective work, “New Zealand's First Refugees, Pahiatua's Polish Children”, Polish Children's Reunion Committee, 2004

Documentaries:

Halina Coats-Ogonowska „The Exiles” TVNZ 1994