



Wartime refugee: Jozef Kubiak, who was one of 733 Polish children who came to New Zealand in World War 2, is pictured in the second row from the back, third from the right, wearing a checked jacket.

Photo: David Hallett

Refugee grateful for new life

Kimberley Rothwell

Sixty years after arriving in New Zealand, one of the country's first refugees continues to give thanks for his second chance.

Jozef Kubiak, 74, was 14 when he arrived in New Zealand in 1944 with more than 800 compatriots fleeing World War 2.

The Christchurch Polish community will tomorrow hold a church service and lunch at the Christ the King Church in Burnside to mark the anniversary of 733 orphaned children and 102 carers arriving in New Zealand.

Kubiak came to New Zealand after a four-year journey, during which he beat disease, starvation and death.

He and his family were deported from their home in Luniniec, in today's Belarus, to Russian labour camps in Archangel. After Germany invaded Russia the Poles were liberated, and Kubiak and his family embarked on a journey halfway around the world.

It began with months of travell-

ing by train across Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran, ending in Basra, southern Iraq.

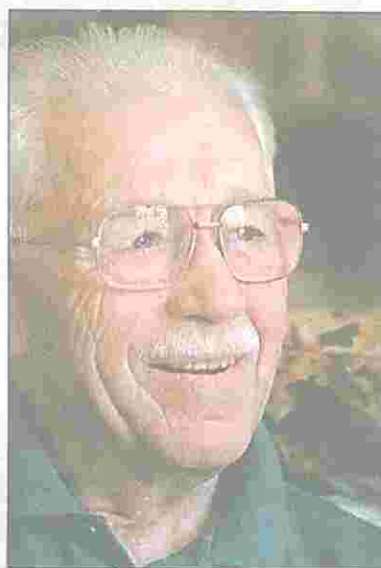
"The trains were just like cattle trains," Kubiak said. "They put as many people as they could in them. People became ill and died from starvation and diseases."

Among the dead were four of his siblings. "The dead were hauled off the trains at the nearest town. That's what happened to my brothers and sisters. There was no chance to say goodbye to them."

After spending time in orphanages in Turkmenistan and Iran, the Poles were sent to India. They then set sail from Bombay to New Zealand on the General Randall.

Only two of Kubiak's siblings survived to make the journey — brother Franek and sister Wladzia.

Arriving in Wellington, Kubiak was impressed with the greenness of the country. "We didn't know anything about New Zealand and didn't speak any English. We had heard of islanders and Maori, but thought New Zealand was at the end of the world.



Polish refugee: Josef Kubiak

"When we arrived we were so welcomed by everybody. There were children to meet us and they were giving us icecreams. We couldn't understand them, but their expressions said more than words could say."

The Poles were resettled at a camp in Pahiatua. Kubiak stayed there until 1946, when he was selected to go to St Kevin's College in Oamaru.

"With limited English, it was difficult for a while not being able to communicate, but the church services were in Latin, so they were exactly the same as we had in Poland."

After school he worked for the Bank of New Zealand, then Databank. He married Marie, a New Zealander.

They had five children and now have 12 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. He has not been back to his country of birth, and has only distant relatives still living there.

"I'm from New Zealand now. I have a New Zealand passport," he said. "We're very grateful that (then prime minister) Peter Fraser gave us residency here and gave us opportunities to do something with our lives."

"Some people say 'how could you get through all this?' We don't look backwards, though we can't forget what happened."