

# Polish civilian camps in World War II

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During World War II thousands of Poles who had been sent to Siberia after the 1939 Soviet invasion of Poland managed to leave the Soviet Union with the Anders' Army. They ended up in Iran, India, Palestine, New Zealand, British Africa, as well as in Mexico.

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A Polish woman and her grandchildren at an American Red Cross evacuation camp in Teheran, Iran.

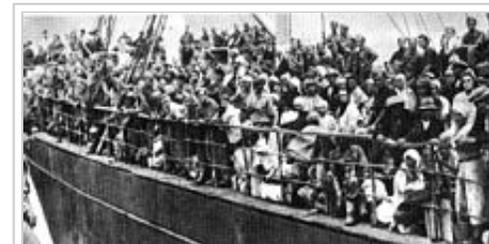
## Background

In 1939, following German and Soviet attacks on Poland (see Polish September Campaign), the territory of the Second Polish Republic was divided between the two invaders. Eastern Poland was annexed by the Soviet Union, and soon afterward Moscow began a program of mass deportations (see Sybirak, Population transfer in the Soviet Union, Poles in the former Soviet Union). Hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens were forced to leave their homes and were transported to Siberia, Kazakhstan, and other parts of the Soviet Union. There were several waves of deportations during which whole families were sent to different parts of the Soviet Union.<sup>[1]</sup>

The fate of the deported Poles improved in mid-1942, after the signing of the Sikorski–Mayski agreement. An Amnesty for Polish citizens in the Soviet Union was declared. The Anders' Army was formed, which attracted not only soldiers who had been kept in Soviet camps, but also thousands of civilians, including a number of Polish orphans whose parents had perished in camps. Thousands died along the way to centers of the newly formed Polish army, mostly due to an epidemic of dysentery, which decimated men, children and women.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Evacuations

On March 19, 1942, general Władysław Anders ordered the evacuation of Polish soldiers and civilians who lived next to army camps. Between March 24 and April 4, 33,069 soldiers left the Soviet Union for Iran, as well as 10,789 civilians, including 3,100 children. This was a small fraction of the approximately 1.7 million Polish citizens who had been arrested by the Soviets at the beginning of the war. Most Poles were forced to stay in the Soviet Union.<sup>[3]</sup> Polish soldiers and civilians who left stayed in Iranian camps at Pahlevi and Mashhad, as well as Tehran.



A Ship carrying Polish soldiers and civilian refugees arrives in Iran from the Soviet Union, 1942.

After the first evacuation, Polish - Soviet relations deteriorated and the Soviet government began arresting Polish officials. On August 9, 1942, a second evacuation began, which lasted until September 1. Polish evacuees had to travel by train to Krasnovodsk, where they took a ship across the Caspian Sea to Iran. Some had to travel by land to Ashgabat. The Polish consulates in the

USSR issued in-land temporary passports for those being evacuated: these had to be presented at the border crossings in order to proceed. According to one of the evacuees, Wanda Ellis:

The hunger was terrible, we did not get a loaf of bread a day, as we had in Siberia. Each slice of bread had to be stolen or gotten in any other way. It was a hell - hungry, sick people, children in rail cars, filled with louse. Illnesses - typhoid, dysentery, no restrooms in cars. To relieve ourselves, we had to jump out of the train whenever it stopped. It is a miracle that we survived, with thousands dead.<sup>[4]</sup>

During the second evacuation 69,247 persons left the Soviet Union, including 25,501 civilians (9,633 children). Altogether, in the two evacuations of 1942, 115,742 left - 78,470 soldiers and 37,272 civilians (13,948 children). Approximately 90% of them were Polish, with most of the remaining ones Jewish.

Poles did not stay in Iran for long, for several reasons:

- hostility of Soviet authorities, which occupied northern Iran (see Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran),
- threat from the German armies, which had reached the Caucasus (see Case Blue),
- poor living conditions.

## Camps in Africa, India and other locations

### British Africa

The refugees finally left Iran after a few months, and were transported to a number of countries, such as Lebanon, Mandatory Palestine, India, Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, South Africa, New Zealand and Mexico.

Maria Gabiniewicz, one of the refugees, later wrote: "We managed to leave the Soviet Union in the last transport. Still, thousands of distraught Poles remained there, sent to kolkhozs. I will never forget the journey on trucks through the mountains from Ashgabat to Tehran. After the hell that we survived, Tehran was a different world. Camp life was organized, there was a

school, scouts, and religious life. Tehran was a gate, through which we were sent, in groups, to different parts of the world. My mother refused the tempting offer of going to Santa Rosa in Mexico. She wanted us to go either to India or Africa, as it was closer to Europe. She hoped we would return to Poland some day. We were transported on board a warship, through Persian Gulf (...) After twelve days, we reached the port of Beira in Mozambique. The adults were uneasy and afraid of the unknown, but us, the children, were happy for an adventure. We were not first the Poles in Africa. There were already 22 camps, with 18,000 people who like us had gone through different places of exile in the USSR, scattered across British Africa - from Kenya to Cape Colony.<sup>[4]</sup>

## **East Africa**

The Polish refugees who were going to East Africa were shipped from Persia, or brought from Persia to India and shipped from an Indian port, to different African destinations. The Kenyan port Mombasa, the Tanganyikan ports Tanga and Dar es Salaam and the Mozambican ports Beira and Laurenço Marques, which is today's Maputo, were the first African stops for the Polish refugees.

## **Northern Rhodesia**

In October 1942 the Director of War Evacuees and Camps of Northern Rhodesia, Gore Browne, expected only around 500 Polish refugees on his territory. They were coming from the Middle East. In August 1945 the number of Polish refugees in Northern Rhodesia was 3,419 of which 1,227 stayed in camps in the capital Lusaka, 1,431 in Bwana Mkubwa at the Copperbelt, 164 in Fort Jameson at the border with Nyasaland and 597 in Abercorn in the Northern Province.

## **Abercorn camp**

Abercorn camp was the last camp that was built in Northern Rhodesia. It was set up in 1942 in the remote northern province just outside today's Mbala. Approximately 600 Polish refugees were brought to Abercorn in contingents. They came by ship to Dar es Salaam and via Kigoma to Mpulunga on Lake Tanganyika and subsequently they went in groups to Abercorn by lorry. Wanda Nowosiad-Ostrowska remembered in the book of 'The Polish Deportees of World War II' of T. Piotrowski that Abercorn camp was divided into six sections of single room houses, a washing area, a laundry, a church and four school buildings with seven classes. The cooking was done in a large kitchen, situated in the middle. One of the administrators lived in a building that also had a community centre where films were shown. She depicted quite

a sociable image with singing songs in the evening, listening together to the radio in order to be informed about the war in Europe and doing craft work with other women in the evenings. [5]

## **Closing**

In January 1944 the Polish staff in all East African camps had been reduced. In an official letter from the British Authorities it was said that: "It has been agreed that the welfare work in the Polish settlements must continue and the minimum staff stays to ensure this must be retained." In January 1948 the Commissioner of the East African Refugee Administration wrote a letter about the deportation of the Polish refugees Abercorn camp. They were going from Kigoma to Dar es Salaam and from there by ship to the United Kingdom where their next of kin – often husbands and sons who had been fighting in the war - were getting courses and training for civilian jobs. The deportation from Abercorn was called Operation Polejump.

## **Residency**

When it was decided that Polish refugees should be brought to East Africa, the British never had the intention to keep them there. Before the deportations, in 1941, it was already agreed that the evacuees were going to East Africa for "a special or temporary purpose." In October 1946 the Secretary of State in London said refugees who could get a job in the territory for at least 6 months or had a sum of money sufficient to sustain themselves, could stay. In Northern Rhodesia 245 evacuees were accepted for permanent residence. From Abercorn a single woman with a daughter and a son, whose father went missing in the war in Europe, and one male were allowed to stay.<sup>[6]</sup> The single man has not been traced, the woman, Josefa Bieronska, moved to South Africa with her children. Her son died young due to an accident, her daughter still lives in South Africa with her grand children.<sup>[7]</sup>

## **Living**

Living in Africa was very difficult for the Poles who were unfamiliar with local customs and languages and were not used to tropical weather. In Uganda, the biggest camps, which housed some 6,400 people, including 3,000 children, were at Koja (Mukono District by Lake Victoria), and Masindi, Western Uganda. Each camp had its own school, club-room, theatre. The housing was primitive with dwellings made of clay, with roofs made of grass and banana leaves.

Bogdan Harbuz stayed at Koja camp: "We did not receive any money for food, we only got 5 shillings a month for our expenses. The food was delivered: rice, flour, meat, salt, sugar, tea, and some coffee. People kept their own gardens, with vegetables. We were very poor, there were no jobs, kids had their classes in the open, there were no books."

Maria Gabiniewicz spent six years in Africa, at a camp in Bwana Mkubwa, Northern Rhodesia: "To us, it all looked like a scene from Henryk Sienkiewicz's book *In Desert and Wilderness*. Houses made of clay, in the heart of Africa. Nothing looked like Poland, but adults in our camp did their best to emphasize our roots. There was a mast with a huge Polish flag, and the White Eagle on the gate."<sup>[4]</sup>

## India

Many Poles left Iran for India, thanks to the efforts of Eugeniusz Banasinski, Polish consul in Bombay. Indian government agreed to host 10,000 Polish refugees, including 5,000 orphans. Children were taken care of by Polish Red Cross and residents of Bombay. At first, they were transported to the town of Bandra, in the suburbs of Bombay, where Hanka Ordonówna took care of the kids. Then a special camp for Polish children was built near the village of Balahadi in Jamnagar, Kathiawar. Further Polish transports came to India by sea, from the port of Ahvaz to Bombay. Several camps were opened in and around Bombay, with the biggest one located at Kolhapur Valivade, where 5,000 stayed. Among people who stayed there was Bogdan Czaykowski.

Wiesława Paskiewicz, who stayed at Kolhapur, wrote: "Our daily activities were marked by school, church and scouting. We were mentally shaped by such organizations, as Sodality of Our Lady, and The Eucharistic Crusade. There were sports teams, a choir and activities groups".<sup>[4]</sup>

## Near East

Some 22,000 Poles remained in the Near East, mostly in Iran, Kingdom of Iraq, and British Palestine. In late 1942 and early 1943, Polish camps in Iran were located at Tehran, Isfahan, Mashhad and Ahvaz. First schools were opened in Tehran, where after one year there were ten Polish educational institutions. At Isfahan Polish orphanage and children camp was opened, where 2,300 children and 300 adults stayed and eight elementary schools were created.



Teheran, Iran. Polish refugee colony operated by the Red Cross has a colorful setting in the outskirts of the city



Teheran, Iran. Polish refugees' faces

First Polish refugees came to Palestine in summer 1942. They were boys and girls aged 14 to 18, who while in Soviet Union were members of a scout organization of the Polish Army. Transports of scouts, which came to Palestine, were directed to Camp Bashit. There, all were divided into several groups, and began their education. In August 1942, two schools were created - for younger (aged 8 – 15) and older scouts. Classes began on September 1, 1942. Altogether, between 1942 and 1947, Polish schools in Palestine had 1632 students. Furthermore, there were schools in Egypt, at Tall al Kabir and Heliopolis. Altogether, in 1943 - 44 there were 26 schools for Polish refugees in the Near East.<sup>[4]</sup>



Polish refugee tents in Iran, 1943

## New Zealand

In 1944, Prime Minister of New Zealand, Peter Fraser agreed to take a limited number of Polish orphans and half-orphans, whose parents had died either in Soviet Union or Tehran, or whose fathers fought at the front. While still in Isfahan, 105 teachers, doctors and administrative workers were selected, plus one

priest, Father Michał Wilniewicz and two Roman Catholic nuns. On November 1, 1944, USS General George M. Randall (AP-115) arrived at Wellington, with 733 children on board.

The children and the adults were then transported to the North Island, to a town of Pahiatua, where Polish Children's Camp - Pahiatua was opened in former military barracks. It had a club-room, a hospital and a gym. Main street of the camp was named after general Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski. There was a kindergarten, men's school, women's school and a middle school. Later on, scouting teams were organized. Polish Children's Camp was financed by the government of New Zealand, with help from Polish Government in Exile, based in London.

## Mexico

Upon agreement between prime minister Władysław Sikorski and the government of Mexico, some 10,000 Polish refugees settled there as well. The government of Mexico did not finance their stay, money came from the funds of a special Polish - British - American committee. Poles in Mexico were not allowed to leave their camps. They worked as farmers, and their first transport came through India in October 1943, with 720 people, most of them women and children. They settled in a camp at Santa Rosa, near the city of Leon, in central Mexico. Additional Polish transports came in late 1943.

## Poles that remained in Soviet Union

After Polish Army had left the Soviet Union, the attitude of the Soviets towards the remaining Poles worsened. Both Soviet authorities and citizens of the country claimed that since Polish Army did not fight the Germans, Poles were not entitled to any privileges. On January 16, 1943, People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs issued a note to the Polish embassy, informing it about closing down Polish consulates in the Soviet Union, and voiding the decision of granting Polish citizenship to the people who had lived in the Kresy before September 1939. This meant that all remaining Poles were re-granted Soviet citizenship, and received Soviet passports. NKVD agents issued Soviet passports to Poles in February - May 1943. Those who refused were persecuted, sent to jails, mothers were told that if they refuse, they would be sent to labor camps, and their children would end up at orphanages. Altogether, 257,660 citizens of the Second Polish Republic (190,942 adults and 66,718 kids) received the passports. 1,583 refused, and were sent either to prisons or gulag.

## See also

- Katyn massacre
- Polish areas annexed by the Soviet Union
- Repatriation of Poles (1944–1946)
- Soviet repressions of Polish citizens (1939-1946)
- List of Soviet Union prison sites that detained Poles

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History of the Soviet Union and Soviet Russia | Poland–Soviet Union relations  
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