



POLISH ASSOCIATION OF
SIBERIAN DEPORTEES
IN SOUTH AFRICA

PRZETRWAŁIŚMY



WE HAVE SURVIVED



Prologue

In 966 Poland acquired statehood with the baptism of Mieszko I. In 1295 Przemysł II adopted the White Eagle as the state symbol. Continuous enlightened thinking with protection for religions and ethnic diversity, tolerant Poland fostered new ideas in culture, literature, science. 1569, the Union of Lublin, established the Commonwealth of The Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, characterised by an elective monarchy.



White Eagle
adopted by
Przemysł II



Grand coat of arms:
Polish-Lithuanian
Commonwealth

The Commonwealth's fortunes waxed and waned and internal divisions by the *szlachta* (nobility), influenced by foreign interests, resulted in it losing its strength.

The Partitions of the Commonwealth was pursuant to the Treaty of Berlin or the **Treaty of the Three Black Eagles**, because the three signatories, Austria, Russia and Prussia used black eagles as state symbols.

The treaty had provisions for all three powers agreeing that it was in their best interest that their common neighbour, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, did not undertake any reforms that might re-strengthen it.

The last king of Poland, Stanisław II August Poniatowski, formulated the Constitution of the 3rd May in 1791 and is the highlight of 18th century constitutional history. The "liberum veto" was abolished, majority rule was introduced and personal freedoms were guaranteed to all individuals.

Such reforms were not welcomed by Poland's autocratic, expansionist and imperialist neighbours who wanted to maintain the subjugation of their peoples. To ensure that democratic principles and ideas do not find root in their respective empires, Russia, Prussia and Austria undertook the Three Partitions of Poland.

- The First Partition: August 5, 1772.
- The Second Partition: January 23, 1793
- The Third Partition: October 24, 1795. With this partition, the independent state of Poland ceased to exist.

Thus began the colonisation, oppression, de-Polonisation of Poland, destruction of Poland's languages, cultures and enlightened achievements.

Russia's primary objective was the complete Russification of Poland.

In addition, the three occupiers and oppressors used every method to hinder the economic development of their respective portions of Poland.

As a result of the Partitions, Poles were forced to seek a change of status quo in Europe. Polish poets, scientists, politicians, noblemen, writers, artists, many of whom were forced to emigrate, became the revolutionaries and freedom fighters of the 19th century, as a **desire for freedom and liberty became one of the defining cornerstones of Polish romanticism**. In their strive for freedom and liberty, Poles participated in many uprisings in Prussian, Austrian and Russian occupied Poland.

Russia's quelling of Polish uprisings and struggles for liberty and freedom was particularly brutal, and included deporting Polish revolutionaries and freedom fighters to Siberia.

The 19th century history of the Poles is a sad but a courageous, romantic and a heroic one.

The Fourth Partition

Formed out of the chaos of the First World War approximately 400,000 soon-to-be Polish citizens died fighting for Poland's three partitioning powers. On 11 November 1918, now celebrated as Independence Day, Marshall Piłsudski assumed control of the Polish forces, proclaimed an independent Polish state and went on to form a new national government.



Boundaries of the 2nd Polish Republic 1918 - 1939



Coat of arms 1919-1927



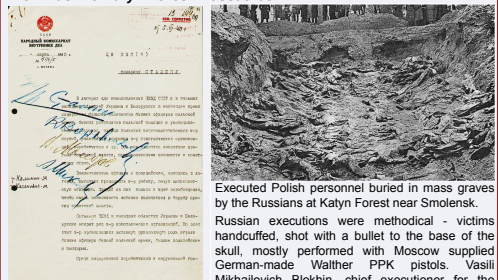
Coat of arms 1927-1939

The 2nd Polish Republic was short-lived. On 24 August 1939, pre-planned by Russia and Germany, the notorious and infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was signed, dividing Poland – the Fourth Partition. Following the German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939, Russia invaded Poland on 17 September 1939, immediately starting the de-Polonisation of occupied lands.

The Polish nation was then subjected to a calculated Russian-German ethnic cleansing campaign that would later be defined as a new crime against humanity called "genocide".



Another criminal act of historic proportions and yet another example of Russian state sponsored terrorism was the cold blooded murder of 22,000 Polish citizens in various locations in what has become known as the Katyn Forest massacres.



Executed Polish personnel buried in mass graves by the Russians at Katyn Forest near Smolensk. Russian executions were methodical - victims handcuffed, shot with a bullet to the base of the skull, mostly performed with Moscow supplied German-made Walther PPK pistols. Vasil Mikhailovich Blokhin, chief executioner for the NKVD, personally shot 6,000 of those condemned to death over a period of 28 days in April 1940.

Katyn: a crime against humanity, for which Russia is yet to be brought to justice.

Siberia: Russia's slavery and killing fields

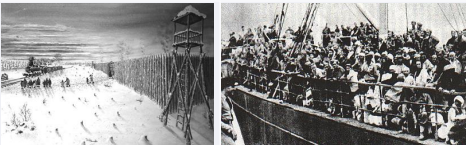
During the period 10 February 1940 to 20 June 1941 the infamous NKVD, as part of the de-Polonisation of Russian occupied Poland, brutally **deported 1,7million Polish citizens** in inhumane conditions in overcrowded cattle trains to Russia's slavery and killing fields of Siberia – into regions that did not provide for basic living conditions. Forced into murderously hard labour many people perished after only a few weeks.



Working at back-breaking jobs in mines, quarries, poverty-stricken collective farms, forests felling trees (regardless of age and level of health) they lived in lice-infested primitive barracks, stables, *zemlyanki* (earth dugouts). Braving inhuman climatic conditions camp authorities repeatedly stated that this was to be their life forever and that Poland had ceased to exist as a state.

By 22 June 1941, when the outbreak of German-Russian hostilities occurred, 0,7 million of them were dead - starved or worked to death or murdered by the Russian terror system. In the Polish-Russian (Sikorski-Maisky) pact of July 30 1941, Russia agreed to granting amnesty to all Polish citizens deprived of their liberty in Russian exile/slavery. Russia also agreed to the raising of a Polish army on Russian territory

Elated, far-flung Polish deportees began to make their way as best they could to Buzuluk, where General Anders' Polish army was forming, and to other collection points in the hope of liberation. These journeys to freedom, months long, brought new suffering and tens of thousands died from hunger, cold, heat, disease and exhaustion.



Forced labour camp in frozen wastelands of Siberia.

Authorities often impeded the release of the deportees from their various places of confinement and absolved themselves from assisting them in any way whatsoever upon their release. This utter lack of concern brought about a crisis of unimaginable proportions. After the discovery of the Katyn massacres, Russia claimed to be 'offended' by the Polish insistence on an independent investigation, and broke off diplomatic relations with the Polish government-in-exile and stopped any further release of deportees.

During the two great evacuations of Polish refugees (the 1st, between March 24 and the beginning of April 1942; the 2nd, between August 10 and September 1, 1942), from Krasnovodsk across the Caspian Sea to Pahlavi, and smaller overland evacuations from Ashkhabad to Mashhad (March and September 1942), **only about 115,000 people, of whom about 13,000 were children, reached freedom.**

Oudtshoorn: a safe haven

The London based Polish Government-in-exile acting through its South African Consul General, Dr Stanisław Łepkowski, secured an agreement from the Union Government of South Africa to transport 500 children accompanied by 10 adults from Persia to South Africa. After a risky voyage the SS Dunera arrived in Port Elizabeth. Passengers included 50 adults as well as 18 young people who did not conform to the agreement.

During the period that was described as "quarantine", successful negotiations between the Polish Consul General and the Union Government eventually resulted in all the Polish passengers disembarking in Port Elizabeth. Zofia Anna Łepkowska, wife of the Consul General, helped establish the Polish Children's Home of St. Andrew Boboli in Oudtshoorn where the children arrived on 10 April 1943.



The good ship "Dunera"



Picture of some of young Polish Children of Oudtshoorn



Few years later



A variety of activities were undertaken to maintain Polish language and culture.



Emphasis was placed on education and children were sent to various schools across Southern Africa. Picture of girls at the convent in Umzumbe.



Starting out on a new life in South Africa, with many maintaining close bonds with each other as part of an extended family.

In 1947 the Polish Children's Home was closed. The children were sent to various schools across Southern Africa to complete their education. It is estimated that half of the children remained to start a new life in South Africa, many leaving to be reunited with family, and a few returning to the illegitimate and illegal Russian communist enslaved People's Republic of Poland.

Poland has not yet perished

The courageous and heroic pursuit for liberty by Poles led to the peaceful downfall of communism. The Third Polish Republic was established in 1989 as a democratic state ruled by law and implementing the principles of social justice. Poland's on-going history, steeped with the evolution of enlightened supreme laws of the land, brought into effect the current Constitution on 17 October 1997. Two phrases in the **Preamble to the Constitution**:

.....Bound in community with our compatriots dispersed throughout the world.....

.....Mindful of the bitter experiences of the times when fundamental freedoms and human rights were violated in our Homeland.....

acknowledge and capture the essence of the deportations into Siberia as part of Poland's dramatic, turbulent, sad, heroic but glorious history. The Polish Children of Oudtshoorn's unwavering belief in Poland and its enlightened values has been passed onto subsequent generations.

The book **WE HAVE SURVIVED** is a diary, recollection, and also a historical source for all generations who might be interested in our saga. By our conduct we have proved that only peace and honest work can be constructive. Everything else leads to destruction and disaster.

We want to leave for our grandchildren a rhymoid of peace and love, as a positive contribution for human life. This we have learnt during our half a century in this hospitable land – South Africa. 1993, 50th anniversary of arrival of children in Oudtshoorn. Extract from book published by the Polish Children of Oudtshoorn. Poster heading after this book.

In deference to Our Lady of Częstochowa, Queen and Protector of Poland, the Polish Children established the Black Madonna Chapel in Oudtshoorn's Cathedral's Crypt. Also the Polish section in Oudtshoorn's CP Nel museum.



2008, Polish Siberian Cross awarded to Siberian deportees, including Polish Children of Oudtshoorn

2009, at the memorial in Warsaw dedicated to all Polish citizens deported to Siberia

Since 2003 the Polish Children of Oudtshoorn's subsequent generations and friends hold regular get-togethers to maintain links with Poland.

Epilogue

All the camps and settlements established in Iran, Lebanon, Palestine, India, Africa, Mexico, and New Zealand were meant to be temporary quarters for the Polish refugees until the end of the war and the expected liberation of their country. However, after the **Treaty of Yalta (when the Western Allies unwittingly granted Russia the right to enslave all of Eastern and half of Central Europe)** and the change in Polish borders this became an impossible dream for most, although a few did return to join their families in Poland.

What became of the rest?

Many of those Polish refugees brought to New Zealand and the Union of South Africa remained. The Polish refugees housed in the various camps in Iran, Lebanon, Palestine, India, and East Africa moved to Great Britain and its dominions from where some later emigrated to the United States, Australia, Canada; some settling in Argentina. Thus ended the **Forgotten Odyssey** of the deportees from Eastern Poland who managed to escape Siberia under the provisions of that tenuous amnesty of 1941.

But what happened to the rest of the hundreds of thousands of deportees who did not leave? For tens of thousands, Siberia became their final resting place – thousands in unmarked graves. Another quarter of a million were repatriated to the "recovered territories" of Western Poland during the massive population exchanges following World War II.

As for what happened to those whose whereabouts are unknown in Siberia, God only knows. Some, no doubt, are still there.

THE POLISH CHILDREN OF OUDTSHOORN – THEIR STORY IN BRIEF

Compiled: Stefan Szewczuk, 17 September 2012. Dedicated to those Polish citizens who did not survive Siberia, in particular the innocent children

With acknowledgements to all references and sources