

Polish Children's Home, Oudtshoorn, South Africa 1942-47

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This is the text of a lecture given by Robert Weiss at the FEEFHS Convention, Salt Lake City in September 1997.

Background

The following is a roster of the 500 Polish children who were removed from Poland and sent to an orphanage in the Union of South Africa, where they remained until after the conclusion of the Second World War. There is great interest on the part of Holocaust survivors in determining their origins, especially difficult task when information on their parents or their place of origin is unknown. I hope the publication of this list may help in their search.

History

On 17 September 1939, two weeks after the German invasion of Poland, Soviet troops swiftly occupied the eastern half of Poland and, after a plebiscite, annexed the area to the Ukraine and Belorussia. Beginning in the winter of 1939-40 Soviet authorities deported over a million Poles, many of them children, to the various provinces in the Soviet Union. Almost one third of the deportees were Jewish.

For a description of the life of the deportees during this period the reader is referred to the Hoover Archival Documentary *War Through Children's Eyes*, a collection of essays written by the children like the subjects of this paper.

In the summer of 1941 the Polish government in exile in London received permission from the Soviet Union to release several hundred thousand former Polish citizens from labor camps, prisons and forcible resettlement in the Soviet Union, to organize military units among the Polish deportees, and later to transfer Polish civilians to camps in the British-controlled Middle East and Africa. There the Polish children were able to attend Polish schools.

In 1942, the London government, acting through their Consul General Dr. Mi. Stanislaw Lepkowski, secured permission from the government of the Union of South Africa to transport 500 of the estimated 220-250,000 children to that country. In 1943, after they had been evacuated through the southern Soviet republics to Iran, the children were brought to South Africa.

The Polish Children's Home (Dom Polskich Dzieci) was organized in Oudtshoorn for their temporary accommodation, care and education. Under the supervision of the South African

Department of Social Welfare, as well as Polish consular and ministry representatives, it remained in operation until 1947.

The Files

The archives of the Polish Children's Home at Oudtshoorn were sent to Dr. Lepkowski in Pretoria in 1947. They eventually came into the possession of Mr. Tadeusz Kawalec, a former Polish consular official who had participated in the work of the Home, and were donated by him to the Hoover Institution in 1975. The records are found in the Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California in a file entitled *Dom Polskich Dzieci (Polish Children's Home), Oudtshoorn, Union of South Africa*. The file, accession number 75068-8.21, contained in two boxes, comprises a chronological file of the correspondence of the Office of the Director of the Polish Children's Home from 1942-1947, and a subject file for the same period arranged alphabetically by subject.

The children described in these files were either orphaned or were deported from Poland to the USSR. The files contain many lists pertaining to the 500 children at the orphanage, their place of origin, parents names, father's occupations, and then-current location of still-living parents. Lists also exist pertaining to the adults who visited the orphanage, the presumption being that they were relatives of one or more of the children, to the people whom the children visited when on holiday and to courses taken by the children. Finally, there are lists indicating where the children were sent in 1944-5, when the orphanage was disbanded.

Lists Consulted

The original list in the file is dated September 1943, and lists the 500 students with vital statistics on each one, including:

- Family Name
- Given Name
- Date of Birth
- Place of Birth (City and District)
- Residence in Poland (City and District)
- Father's and Mother's Names
- Father's Occupation
- Father's and Mother's Current Location

In February 1944 Polish schools in Africa were reorganized and fifteen girls and the mother of one of the girls were transferred to a newly-established secondary school for girls in Digglefold, Southern Rhodesia, four boys sent to a secondary school for boys in Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia and one girl to Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia. The secondary school in the Oudtshoorn Camp was converted into a co-educational trade school, including a General School, Technical Gymnasium and a Business School. Documents from late 1946 to early 1947 detail the teaching staff, subjects taught, class schedules and teaching hours, yielding a good understanding of the education to be obtained by the students at the Technical Gymnasium.

In a related (undated) list of adults who are leaving Oudtshoorn we find the mothers of two (and possibly three) of the students accompanying the students to the secondary schools in the capacity of teachers.

One of two undated lists contains the names, ages, professions and current jobs of over 40 adults living on the grounds of the Polish Orphanage in Oudtshoorn. We find the mothers of 16 of the students, fathers of two, grandmother of one and sister of one. Most of these adults are teachers and retired teachers. There is a doctor, a dentist and dental assistant, a carpenter, tailor, a number of civil servants and a forester working as gym teacher. Many of the wives and widows

