

# The General Langfitt Story

## Chapter 1 - Pre-War Poland

A total of 1181 refugees of the Second World War who had been in Africa between six and eight years, disembarked in Fremantle yesterday from the United States army transport *General W. C. Langfitt* ... about six hundred ... joined trains for Cunderdin and the remainder were sent to Northam ... The majority of adults were females ... there were many widows among the passengers.

This short column in the *West Australian* on Thursday 16 February 1950 announcing their arrival two days earlier<sup>SUP1</sup> gave little indication of the terrible history behind the 'General Langfitt Group', their enforced departure from their beloved homeland Poland, the atrocities and suffering they endured during the journey to and exile in Siberia, Kazakhstan and Arkhangel'sk districts, the years spent in refugee settlement camps or how they happened to arrive on Australian shores. They were simply another group of the many displaced persons who were arriving in Australia after the Second World War, uncertain of what their future here would offer.

Their dramatic story is told in this report.

In order to understand the background to the lives of the people included in this report, and the millions of other Poles displaced, deported and executed in the first half of the twentieth century, it is necessary to provide an overview of the history of Poland. This is a challenging task because few modern nations believe their long and glorious past has been so systematically misrepresented by other European historians. For the purposes of this report it has only been possible to select key turning points from a range of detailed historical interpretations and describe them in a summarised form. A list of key references is included in the bibliography.

### Brief Historical Overview

Poland emerged as a kingdom in the tenth century, around the time that its monarchy was baptised in the Latin rites of the Roman Catholic Church, and grew into a huge state in the centre of Europe, stretching east into areas subsequently claimed by Russia. In its 'Golden Age' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Poland had created a unique political republic headed by elected kings who were directly responsible to the Diet, the parliament of nobles. This system made Poland almost ungovernable: while feudal institutions had prospered, the central powers were unable to control the independence of the landowners and foreign neighbours found it easy to intervene in the struggles between the king and the nobility.

In 1772 Austria, Prussia and Russia began a series of partitions of Poland which resulted in Poland disappearing from the map of Europe for 123 years. Polish patriotism became ever more closely aligned to the Roman Catholic Church, and against the creeds of their oppressors, German Protestantism and Russian Orthodoxy. Recurrent revolts in 1794, 1830-31, 1846, 1863-64 and 1905 kept the Polish question and national spirit alive.

Many Poles involved in these various insurrections were either killed or driven into exile. For example, one of the interviewees, Teresa Sosnowska's (née Zebrowska), paternal great-

grandfather had been deported to Russia, with all his family, after the 1863 uprising. When he returned he settled as a farmer in the Lomza district, east of the River Vistula, where the family prospered until 1939. Another interviewee, Regina Tabaczynska's (nèe Tijewski) paternal great grandfather left Poland after the 1863 insurrection, travelling Europe until he finally settled in Rumania, where he married a woman of Polish-Rumanian parents. He returned to Poland after the First World War and married in 1921. Similarly, Regina Tabaczynska's maternal grandfather also had to leave Poland after their estate was confiscated. His father and brother were deported to Russia, where they died. He settled for a time in Madrid, married a Spanish woman and then moved to Vienna, where Regina's mother was born in 1898. After the death of both parents and her first husband, she returned to Poland, which had reappeared on the map of Europe from the ashes of the First World War.

In 1919, the League of Nations sought to implement Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, which included the principle of national self-determination. It was considered impossible to recreate Polish boundaries of 1772 because the Poland of 1772 had included substantial non-Polish areas and because nearly a century and a half had caused many changes. The League of Nations diplomats used a German census of 1910 as a guideline to the ethnic composition of the western region, a tool which many Polish historians claim to have been far from impartial. The Prussian provinces of Poznan and Pomerania, as well as the corridor to the Baltic, were ethnically Polish. The port of Danzig created problems because the urban centre was German but the environs were Polish. The result was that Danzig was declared a free city belonging to neither country - a solution guaranteed to magnify local tensions and foster national hatreds in the region. The southern province of Silesia had been ethnically Polish before partition, but a century of industrial development had altered the ethnic map of the area and had made the region particularly sought after. The diplomatic solution proffered by the League of Nations was to split the region along an east-west axis, with the richer region going to Germany. The southern region of Silesia was divided between Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The solution to determining the eastern boundaries was a north south divide along the Bug River, under the direction of Lord Curzon, known as the Curzon Line. This arrangement left the centres of Wilno in Lithuania and Lwów in the Ukraine under temporary Polish administration. This proved to be no more than a diplomatic solution and had little effect. The eastern frontier was in turmoil as the Russian Civil War raged and as the Poles took control of land west of the Curzon Line and then pushed east. Under Josef Pilsudski, the Poles renewed war with Russia in 1920 and advanced the frontier more than 160 kilometres eastward, where it was fixed by the Treaty of Riga in 1921. This new frontier left Poland with *de facto* if not *de jure* control of both Lwów and Wilno and meant that some 80 000 Russians, 1500 000 Byelorussians and nearly 5 000 000 Ukrainians came under Polish rule (Davies, 1983, p. 406). Over 2 000 000 Poles were left outside the boundaries of the new Polish state (Zamoyski, 1987, p. 38). The new Poland and the new communist Russia started relations with a legacy of mistrust and bitterness which had deep historical roots. As Timothy Gordon Ash (1991, p. 5) has observed, Polish national identity can be historically defined in terms of a lengthy opposition to Russia far more profound than a straightforward dispute of borders. Political and religious differences over several centuries had been equally significant.

The First World War and the shifting frontiers left in their wake considerable damage and dislocation. An estimated 13 per cent (4 000 000 people) of the total population of Poland died

through military action, exile, disease and famine. Industry and agriculture were exhausted through the war effort and both communication and administrative structures were in tatters. Reconstruction of Poland meant starting from scratch. Inter-war Poland was overwhelmingly agricultural, with over 75 per cent of the population dependent on agriculture in 1919. By 1939 this had decreased to 60 per cent but, despite the efforts to develop the east of Poland, it was still considerably poorer than the west. The remnants of the aristocracy and the *intelligentsia*, those with a higher education who performed 'mental work' rather than physical labour, formed a coherent class engaged in teaching, clerical work, government service and administration, the Church and the police force.

Inter-war Poland was not only stratified along economic but also ethnic lines. The 1931 census showed that less than 70 per cent of the population were Polish. Eastern Slavs, mostly Ukrainians, made up nearly 19 per cent of the population, Germans made up 4 per cent of the population in the western regions and Jews made up a total 10 per cent. Religious affiliation mirrored ethnic status fairly closely. Jews and Germans were urban dwellers engaged mostly in industry and commerce. Byelorussians and Ukrainians were mostly peasants settled in the eastern regions close to the borders which separated them from their brethren in Russia (Ascherson, 1987, p. 59; Garrison Walters, 1988, p. 182).<sup>2</sup>

It was to these new eastern provinces that many Polish soldiers and their families moved as farmer settlers in the following decade. These soldiers were granted small plots of land as a reward for their patriotism, and to help re-establish Polish claims to the area. Maria Sosnowska was one of those who moved east:

I was only 17 when I married a returned soldier in 1923. He had fought in the war against Bolshevik Russia in 1920 and we moved to Polesie,<sup>3</sup> in the eastern part of Poland, to the soldier settlements. Our settlement consisted of a variety of people - officers, junior officers and ordinary soldiers - so our lives became rich culturally. I liked the local people as well. Some of them were very poor but they were very clean and decent. The Byelorussian women did not want to belong to our associations but relations between us were good. I was godmother to some Byelorussian children and we would visit each other's houses. Even on Christmas Eve, which is a special time when Polish families get together to break a wafer, we would get together. Later when I was being deported one of them brought me a big loaf of bread. That was a great help to me.

At first, we had to live in temporary accommodation which we built. When you start a farm, the out-buildings are more important than the house itself because you have to have storage for grains and for the animals in winter. Of course, children started coming so it was pretty hard but we were all young. Eventually we built quite a big house because we had help from my husband's father, who was also a farmer. It was a close community and very busy as we built our social life and organised different associations. We had a theatrical group that was well known in the area, and I was also a member of the 'Country Women's Association' which organised sewing, baking, cooking and gardening courses for the Polish women. Many of the courses were held at our house because we were near the main road.

The new state introduced seven years of compulsory schooling and managed to achieve this despite only the most rudimentary school system in the eastern provinces. After this, education

was elitist. Although technically free and accessible to all, only 7 per cent of high school children came from a peasant or labouring background (Ascherson, 1987, p.182). Maria Sosnowska recalled the efforts to get schools and churches established:

Before the First World War there had been a school in the next village but when the Germans came they took it apart and shifted it somewhere else so there was no school. Our settlement was between two villages and we wanted a school in our settlement so my husband and one of our neighbours, who had been a captain in the Polish army, went to the city to get permission to build a school. They were told that the school couldn't be started if there were less than twenty children. The problem was that there were only five Polish children. The rest were Byelorussians who didn't want to go to school. The Polish government was very concerned about the education of the people and an inspector came and told these Byelorussian families that they would be fined if they did not send their children to school. They started to come to school and we built a double-storey school house in about 1929. It was a beautiful building and we had good teachers, so the school was known in the district for its excellence.

Religion was very important to most Polish people and although we didn't have a church we lived on the edge of a great land-holding where there was a chapel. This chapel was open to everyone and my husband was on the church committee.

Stanislawa Jutrzenka-Trzebiatowska (Adamska n<sup>è</sup>e Grzelak) was born in 1907 in Kolo, west of Warsaw, the second eldest in a family of twelve children.



Family photograph 1931 (Courtesy of Stanislaw Jutrzenka-Trzebiatowska)

The area we lived in was under Russian rule so there was no schooling in our village, only informal schooling was available. Girls were not allowed to go to school. A friend who was a teacher helped our parents to find a school for my elder brother and me about twenty kilometres from my parents' place. When we had two or three school-free days we would go home by train. We would hold hands because by the time we got to our parents' house it would be getting dark.

In 1925 and 26 I did my teaching training, after which I taught in the next village to where I lived. I taught for six years and then in 1935 I married Henryk Adamski, who was also a teacher. After we were married I changed my place of residence to a village near Pinsk, in eastern Poland, where my husband lived. There was a big school there and we taught there together. My daughter Danuta Teresa was born in 1936. I had only one

daughter because we were together for only four years.

Krystyna Jarzebowska and her sister Halina Juszczyk (nèe Kojder) were born in the ex-servicemen's settlement of Niechiewiczze, near Novogrod, in eastern Poland. Their father had been only 17 when he joined the Polish army as a legionnaire in the First World War. As a consequence he never finished his studies at business college, choosing instead to take up a land grant in eastern Poland, like many of his army colleagues.

This part of Poland was destroyed by the first war. There was nothing but the land. All of them started from scratch. We had a lot of neighbours and in the twenty years when Poland had freedom we all got on quite well. There were more Byelorussians than us Poles in the area, but we all learnt and spoke Polish at school. My father was a very good organiser and he had done so well that he bought another property. (Krystyna Jarzebowska)

Irena Makowiecka (nèe Glowacka) was 9 years old when the Second World War started.

I was born in a small town near Tarnopol in eastern Poland and I spent the first seven years of my life there. My mother, who came from Warsaw, always said that she spent the happiest years of her life in Grzymalów. This part of Poland is called Podole. It is a very fertile land with black soil. My father was in the police force but we had a bit of land too. We used to go there for Sunday walks and I remember the orchard with cherries and apples, the bubbling brook, lots of forget-me-nots and the huge lilac tree under the kitchen window. In spring their fragrance was overpowering. I have always associated lilac with Poland. My father didn't work the farm, somebody else did that. It was share farming but we would get fruit and, in autumn, potatoes and carrots. The wheat went to the mill and we would get a bag of flour or a bag of porridge oats whenever we needed. When the war started all those products were in the mill and we couldn't get them because all our property was confiscated. The shops were empty and we found ourselves without any food resources.

## **The Build-up to War**

The Nazis seized power in Germany in 1933 and in March 1934 Pilsudski signed a treaty of non-aggression and friendship with Germany. This was far from an alliance since it intended to do no more than lessen the tension which had remained since the corridor to the Baltic and the creation of Danzig as a free city in 1918. Germany had consistently maintained its interests in land west of the corridor.

Hitler started to threaten Poland, demanding access to the Free City of Danzig and a corridor between Germany and Danzig through Polish territory. It was only an excuse to start the war. While Josef Pilsudski, the Polish marshal and a good politician, was in charge, he gave a feeling of security to the general public. When he died in May 1935 there was nobody of equal stature to take his place. There was a feeling of uncertainty, a feeling of doom. Everybody was waiting for the war to start. It seemed to be inevitable. Austria was taken by Hitler in March 1938, followed by Czechoslovakia in March 1939. We were next on the list. Poland didn't prepare for war because we were told not to provoke the Germans by arming, to be weak so they wouldn't have that as an excuse for

attacking. That was the rationale of Neville Chamberlain: don't provoke anybody, cooperate with Hitler and he will cooperate with you. So, while war was in the air, no one expected Russia to attack Poland because we had a pact of non-aggression with Russia which Marshal Pilsudski had signed in 1934. (Irene Makowiecka)

By October 1938, when Hitler renewed his demands for the 'return' of Danzig and territorial rights in the Polish corridor it was clear that conciliation was not working. Over the following months the Polish government began to mobilise its armed forces. Stanisława Jutrzenka-Trzebiatowska (Adamska at the time) remembered how her husband was called to duty three months before Germany invaded Poland.

It was part of a secret mobilisation in which many men, mainly professional men, were taken. For three months I did not know where he was; then he sent me a letter telling me that he would be free for two days. I received a telegram to meet him in Pinsk at the Hotel Pina. We expected to have these two days to ourselves. Two hours later he received a telephone call from his superiors calling him back. It was the sixth of September 1939. This was the last time I saw him.

Under the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a defensive alliance signed by Hitler and Stalin on 23 August 1939, a 'secret additional protocol' agreed that the two powers would carve Poland up between them. The Soviet sphere of influence was to include Finland, the Baltic states of Estonia and Latvia, the Rumanian province of Bessarabia and eastern Poland while the German sphere of influence would include Lithuania and western Poland. Poland was thus divided along the Bug River - the Curzon Line of 1920. Hitler invaded the west of Poland on 1 September 1939. Urszula Paszkowska (née Trella), who was 12 years old when war broke out, recounted the situation which confronted her family at the time:

My father died as a result of post-influenza complications two weeks before war broke out and my mother moved us back to her parents in Drohobycz. Drohobycz was a district city in what was then eastern Poland. It was famous for the oil refinery which was the largest in Poland, and one of the largest in Eastern Europe.

As far as the war was concerned, we were all fearful of it. We knew that the Germans were encircling us. They were not only on the western and northern borders, where East Prussia was, but also in Czechoslovakia, so they were to the south of us. When we first heard about the war it was a shock to us, but we were hoping that our army would be able to withstand the German invasion. Little did we know the disparity in the armaments of both armies or that there was a secret clause in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact which Russia and Germany had signed in August 1939. We did not know that the Soviet Union would attack us from the east.

The oil refinery in Drohobycz was bombed a few days after the beginning of the war. The oil burned for a few days and then they bombed our city a second time, not far away from where we were living. First of all the German army came into Drohobycz. They stayed there for about a week and in that time the lorries were transporting goods from the stores westward. Then on the seventeenth of September the Russian army crossed the eastern border of Poland and started to advance. The Germans moved back and the Russians came in and the same thing happened again. The lorries started going to the east.

According to historian Neal Ascherson (1987, pp. 90-1), at half past three in the morning of 17 September 1939, the Polish Ambassador in Moscow was informed that as the Polish state had ceased to exist (which was not true), steps had become necessary to protect the Ukrainian and Byelorussian minorities in the 'former' Polish territories. An hour later, Soviet troops crossed the frontier. There was little resistance to the invasion, the eastern border being almost unprotected. Irena Makowiecka, reflecting upon the situation as it appeared to many Polish civilians, elucidated:

The Russians claimed that they came as an ally, as helpers, but as soon as they came they disarmed the Polish army who were moving east, away from the German panzer divisions. The Soviets took the retreating army as prisoners of war. Only a small number managed to cross the frontier through Rumania and then on to France, following the Polish government.

As the Soviet forces moved across eastern Poland to a demarcation line along the Rivers Bug and San it became clear that a fourth partition of Poland was taking place. Some individuals from all the major political parties in Poland, including President Ignacy Moscicki, managed to escape via Rumania. These people reassembled in Paris where a coalition government under the lead of General Sikorski, also the head of the remaining Polish army, was formed. Seventy-eight tons of gold from the Polish state bank was also transported to the Rumanian port of Constanza, where it was then taken by a British ship to Turkey, by train to Beirut and from there transported to France by a French cruiser.

The new government was recognised by the British, French and Americans but not by the USSR, which had not yet declared war. Sikorski and his aides had to flee when the Germans attacked France in May 1940. They took up residence in London, which remained their headquarters for the remainder of the war. From this base the Polish government in exile operated for the duration of the war, financed by the state gold which had been smuggled out of Poland in September 1939.

## [Chapter 2](#)