

# The General Langfitt Story

## Chapter 5 - Dispersal

### En Route in Pahlavi and Tehran

On the shores of the Caspian Sea at Pahlavi, Iran, the Polish evacuees found a hastily constructed camp of tents and open shelters nestled in the sand. Królikowski (1983, p.69) described the songs and prayers which could be heard throughout the day as Polish refugees gave thanks for their deliverance at altars which had been erected along the beaches. Many people recalled the joy they felt at their first taste of freedom.

Pahlavi looked very nice to us. After two years, we couldn't believe that there was so much food, especially the fruit on the stalls. In the mornings the Iranian boys would come along the beaches selling raw or cooked eggs. It was a beautiful feeling. The army made very primitive camps - some very large tents and thatched roof shelters which leaked when it rained. We slept on the sand and the latrines were a meeting place where we could chat because you had to wait fifteen or twenty minutes in a queue. (Zdzisława Wasyłkowska)

Make-shift hospitals were constructed to cater for the many people with illnesses such as dysentery, malaria, typhus, eye and skin infections. Królikowski (1983, p.70) cites a report entitled *Polish Pastoral Service Abroad* which estimated that around six hundred people died in Pahlavi, 'at freedom's doorstep'. Many of those who succumbed to disease were children. Unaccompanied or sick children, and some whose families were too weak to care for them, were placed in orphanages where the weakest of them received special care. Kazimierz Sosnowski was 'amongst the skinny young blokes they took to a sanatorium. There we had nothing to do but eat the seven very small, very nourishing meals they were giving us every day. Still not everyone survived. By October we were well enough to travel from Pahlavi to Tehran in army trucks. It was very rough and tiring'.

Many people observed how inappropriate the provision of food in the Pahlavi camp was. While one or two people mentioned a light diet of biscuits and tea, daily provisions consisted of corned beef and a very fatty meat soup, tasty and well meant, but guaranteed to create havoc in constitutions weakened by disease and hunger. Halina Juszczyk, who arrived in Pahlavi in August 1942 with her sister Krystyna, their mother and aunt recalled:

By the time we got to Pahlavi my eyes were very sore and mother took me to the hospital. The treatment was very painful but at least I could see after that. Then both Krystyna and I had diarrhoea. Being skeletons, as we were, a week of diarrhoea and you would be gone, so mother sold my father's very valuable red-gold wedding ring for a little bag of rice to try to save our lives. She wouldn't let us eat anything from the common kitchen. The organisation of those camps was in tatters. They were organised very quickly just to get people out of Russia and all these hungry people were just like people from concentration camps. They gave us, people who were not used to eating anything but a piece of bread a day, this very fatty meat soup. Our stomachs could not take it. They should have given us nourishing drinks first, then rice or something made of

flour, not fatty foods. A lot of people died in Pahlavi because they were so hungry they would eat anything.



**Polish Children, Pahlavi, Iran (Persia), about 1942**  
(Courtesy of Tadeusz Dobrostanski)

In Pahlavi, the evacuees had to undergo a quarantine process to rid them of lice. Those whose heads had not already been shaved in Krasnovodsk had to submit to this on arrival and photographs from these camps show skeletal girls and women still proud enough to have improvised scarves to hide their compulsory baldness. Everyone was sent to communal disinfectant showers to remove the lice which infested the whole refugee community. Urszula Paszkowska recalled that although 'women and men had to go to separate showers, my brother was somehow detached from the men. He remembers hundreds of naked women, with only small towels to cover themselves. That poor boy! It was a terrifying experience for him. I started yelling at him even though I knew it wasn't his fault. I have read the memoirs of one of our friends and he had the same experience. He said it was like Dante's Inferno! It must have been the same for my brother'.

Clothes were removed for burning and replaced with an odd assortment of garments, which, along with blankets and sheets, were donated by Polish organisations in America through the Red Cross. Many people remembered with wry humour the 'silly old things' they found themselves wearing: boys could find themselves wearing girls' combinations, some women were given nightdresses or even men's pyjamas, and many who were children recalled having to double up the legs of men's shorts and tie up the waists. No one complained; these were simply observations hinting at the range of indignities which accompany refugee status. As Aleksandra Wisniewska observed, it didn't matter while they were all together in the Pahlavi camp but 'when we got to Tehràn you can imagine how we felt when people looked at us!'

The evacuees stayed in Pahlavi for anything between a few days to several months awaiting lorries to transport them to Tehràn. When they finally set off, it was a journey few forgot. 'It was a beautiful drive through forests until we got to the mountains. Those hairpin turns! Every moment you expected to be down in the ravine, especially because our driver was always starting last and arriving first! But we survived and suddenly we were in the desert. In Tehràn we were in Camp Number Two, again in tents, sleeping on the sand. Later, we moved into a barrack divided

by sheets into cubicles.' (Regina Tabaczynski)

Królikowski (1983, p. 70-71) maintained that the authorities in Tehràn were not ready to receive such large numbers of refugees and had little conception of what a poor state they would be in on arrival. Accommodation was assigned as it could be found and ranged from an 'incomplete munitions factory' to 'veritable tent cities' scattered throughout Tehràn. As a consequence, many people experienced both separation and reunion in Tehràn. For example, Aleksandra Wisniewska was separated from her mother. When she went to the authorities for help:

They told me to look for Mum in a mortuary. There were corpses up to the ceiling. A 10-year-old looking for her mother there? That was terrible. Anyhow, I found her in hospital and that is where we were reunited. Mum said we had to find my sister. The Polish authorities had no knowledge of her whereabouts. I became sick again and was in and out of hospital and then they put me in a special camp, Number Five, for sick children who had to be built up physically. From that camp the Red Cross organised outings for the children in Tehràn. There was a band and lots of soldiers and I was standing there watching the young cadets and I looked and saw my sister. I pushed and ran calling her. We were in the centre of the crowd, crying and hugging. That is how we got together. My sister was discharged from the cadets and joined us.

Others were not so lucky. Kazimierz Sosnowski, who had seen his mother briefly in Pahlavi, arrived in Tehràn with a group of twenty children but they found there was no-one there to supervise or care for them:

Somehow we kept together while we were shifted from one camp to another. I was sick all the time with a form of scabies. The doctors had little to work with but they did whatever they could. We had communal baths, boys and girls together, with special soap to stop the itching. After that I was on the road to recovery and I put my name on a searcher's list to find my mother. From Tehràn I travelled to Ahvaz where I stayed only a week. I was on the first ship which went directly from Abadàn to Tanga, a port in Tanganyika, where we arrived on the 14th of November 1942. Still, I could not find my mother.



Visiting Polish graves in Tehràn, 1942  
(Courtesy of Stanisława Jutrzenka-Trzebiatowska)

There were three major camps in Tehràn, all extremely primitive, especially at the start, when

epidemics of typhus and typhoid fever broke out once again. Irena Makowiecka considered that she and her mother were 'very lucky':

We lived in Camp Number Three which was in a garden of the Shah. There were trees and bushes and a stream with little waterfalls whispering over the pebbles. It was a lovely place situated in the middle of the desert, created purely for the delectation of the Shah. For us, water had a healing effect and I think about this place with pleasure. In fact, I have a little waterfall in my garden now, built in memory of our time there. We didn't stay in Tehràn very long. After about six weeks we went to Ahvâz for a few days and then we went to East Africa, travelling in a convoy through the Persian Gulf. It was still war time and we were in dangerous waters.

People who stayed longer in Tehràn found that, gradually, the relief effort was stepped up. 'Mattresses, lamps, and other essentials, as well as toys and candies for the children were brought in by Jews, Persians, British, and Americans' who were concerned about the plight of the Polish refugees (Królikowski, 1983, p. 70). Particular effort focused upon providing facilities for the growing numbers of orphans and children separated from one or both parents. Each of the three camps in Tehràn had an orphanage and many children resumed their schooling, initially squatting in the dust and using the ground as a writing tablet. When things became better organised the trestle tables used at meal times were converted into school benches.

In Isphahan, once the capital city of the Shahs, a 'magnificent centre was created for school children, its six schools and boarding houses loaned by European and American nuns. The Shah himself made available a large swimming pool.' (Królikowski, 1983, p. 71). Janina Pienkos was sent to the orphanage in Isphahan when she was 10 years old because her mother became too sick to cope. She remembers 'how beautiful it was. I can still smell it. I remember the sunsets and that the shops were full of people making silver jewellery. We went to some kind of a dinner for all the orphans in the Shah's palace'. Such unaccustomed treats left a strong impression on many children's minds. Halina Juszczyk talked of a similar visit with joy:

One of our teachers told us one morning that 200 children were to be the guests of the Shah of Persia. Lorries took us to his palace. We were so happy. We walked in pairs through the beautiful gardens and then into the palace's rooms. We thought we were in paradise and then they took us to the Hall of Mirrors. There were 366 mirrors in a round room and I remember seeing myself in all these mirrors and thinking, 'Gosh there are so many of me!' There were little tables in the middle and the waiters standing around. We had ice-cream with fruit. You can't imagine the taste of it! It was so beautiful. After about fifteen minutes the Shah and his wife came in and said something in their language which was translated to us. He said he knew what we went through in Russia and he welcomed us in his palace. I remember his face like today. This visit to the Shah's palace was something to remember.

Many people recalled their time in Tehràn with a pleasure born from a sense of freedom and their first taste of 'normality', although for some the close proximity of the Soviet army made them uneasy and keen to leave as soon as transports to the British colonies in Africa and India could be arranged. Some people had to wait several months in Ahvâz, 'one of the hottest places on earth' according to Urszula Paszkowska, and then several days lolling in the Persian Gulf waiting for their transport ships, before finally leaving Iran. Such experiences took their toll on

the elderly and weak. Others spent much longer in Tehràn, especially if they could find work, or had continuing bouts of sickness. Maria Szuster-Nowak recalled:

While we were in a transit camp in Tehràn I went to somebody to ask for a job. I got one in the sewing factory. At first I was just finishing off garments and then I was put on the sewing machine making clothes. Grandma was there so she looked after my daughter Mietka while I was at work. She was too young to go to school.

Mietka Gruszka (nèe Nowak) was only 6 at the time and so didn't have 'too many memories of Iran'. She did remember being 'bored and lonely' staying all day in barracks:

with long platforms where people slept next to one another. We were only divided from the next family by a thin partition or a blanket which we had to find for ourselves. When my mother wasn't working she was very sick with brucellosis and had to go to hospital. My older cousins, whom we met up with in Tehràn, used to come home from school and teach me to read and write just to get me out of their hair. I wanted to go to school very much and when the headmaster of the school was convinced that I could read a few letters and write a few numbers, he let me start. The next year they put me up into grade two and I did six months of grade two in Tehràn before we went to Africa.

Zdzislawa Wasylkowska (nèe Rewaj) spent two years in Tehràn after being reunited with her mother and sister.

Mother got work doing the accounting for a sewing room run by the Red Cross where they made alterations to some of the clothes donated by the Polish community in America. I went back to school where we had professional teachers. There were no books but we were taught and we wanted to learn.

Then we had to move camp because they liquidated ours after sending a lot of people to Africa. My mother did not want to go to Africa. She had quite good connections and she didn't need to go. It was my sister and I who wanted to be with our friends. We left in 1944 on the very last transport from Tehràn to Africa.

The Polish government in exile established a remarkable welfare organisation for Polish war refugees, giving highest priority to the welfare and education of Polish children. This was achieved with the assistance of the International Red Cross and the British authorities who, until the Yalta Conference in February 1945, recognised and worked closely with them. This impressive effort was in part funded by the gold which the Polish government in exile had smuggled out of Poland in 1939. As this source of funding dried up, the fate of the Polish refugees lay increasingly in the hands of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and then the International Refugee Organisation (IRO), one of the agencies which took up the work of UNRRA when it was disbanded in September 1948 (Thomson, 1962, p. 773-4).

Transports out of Iran, to destinations as different as Mexico, India and the British colonies in East and South Africa, began within weeks of the first Polish refugees' arrival there. The journeys by ship, all in convoy because of the treacherous war-time shipping conditions, proved to be memorable for many people, not only because of sea sickness. There are numerous recollections of the kindness shown by some sailors to the children, especially to those who were

fortunate enough to be aboard a Polish vessel. Many of the refugees passed through Karachi, although there were a few transports which went directly to Africa.

While all members of the 'General Langfitt Group' eventually ended up in one of two settlements, Koja in Uganda or Tengeru in Tanganyika, many people spent between three and seven years in other African camps or in Valivade Camp in India before being transferred to Uganda or Tanganyika. After the disruptions of the previous few years, these camps provided a period of relative stability, although uncertainty about the future increased after the war ended and it became clear that, for many Poles, there was no going back to their beloved homeland.

Although there were similarities in the way each of the Polish refugee settlements were organised, there were also notable differences. A brief overview of people's experiences of Valivade, Koja and Tengeru is important because it highlights the spirit of survival and enterprise which ultimately made these Polish women and children such attractive prospects for the Australian Immigration Commission in November 1949.

### **The Polish Settlements in India**

A select group of women and children arrived in India after travelling overland, through Iran in at least two different transports. Bogdan Harbuz vividly remembered their first taste of Indian food, which was 'so spicy, the tears were running down our faces'. He also recalled being taught to sing 'God Save the King' for the children's meeting with the British Viceroy of India, who greeted them on arrival in Delhi. Eventually, and by different routes, these two groups were settled into the Polish Children's Camp Balachadi, near Jamnagar on the Kathiawar Peninsula.



**Maharaja Jam Saheb with Polish children, Balachadi, India, 1943**

(Courtesy of Tadeusz Dobrostanski)

Tadeusz Dobrostanski, whose mother, Janina, 'took over responsibilities for the kindergarten and cultural matters' at the camp and kept substantial records throughout this period, supplied a photocopy of an article from the *Times of India* (New Delhi, 1942). This report observed that the Camp Balachadi had been built by the Indian government, with school rooms donated by the Maharaja of Nawanagar State, Jam Saheb. About 600 Polish children, aged between 3 and 15 years, had 'found a safe haven' at Balachadi. Most were orphans, some had fathers in the Polish army and a few, like Tadeusz and Jerzy Dobrostanski, were accompanied by their mothers. The *Times of India* report commented on how happy the children were, despite 'war experiences ... which have left their mark', and praised the focus on education. It also quoted one worker who

drew attention to the 'pathos behind the happy lives the children are now leading. In spite of the plentiful food at this camp, the kiddies remember poignantly the war-palled days when they were starving and even now have a haunting fear that there won't be enough food for them in the morning -we often find them now taking bread and fruit to bed with them and putting it under their pillows'.

Tadeusz Dobrostanski also emphasised the poor physical health and severe psychological demoralisation of many of these children after their years in the Soviet Union, especially those who had been orphaned or separated from their families. For many of them, stealing had become a matter of survival and the adults at Camp Balachadi were faced with the onerous responsibility of providing appropriate food and medical care as well as 'trying to retrain the children in Christian and Polish ways'. This could not have been an easy task, especially for adults who had sustained their own losses during the war and were also adapting to yet another new environment. Under the circumstances, they provided a 'magnificent service' to these children but it is perhaps inevitable that some people have unhappy memories associated with this time. Bogdan Harbuz recalled how each group of children had an adult, normally a woman, to care for them. One or two of them showed 'a lot of compassion for the children' but in general his memories of Balachadi are 'not very pleasing':

I remember hunger again, and discipline was very strict. We kids thought that no-one cared about us any more. We were asked to serve at the table and we saw the difference in food between the group of older people who were looking after us and what we were getting. We used to go to the rubbish bins behind the kitchen to get some things out of it to eat. The Commandant was always dressed in an army officer's uniform, with a baton that quite often used to land on somebody's backside. He was very strict with us. That is the way I remember it. That is where I first had an attack of malaria and every month after that I had a recurrence so I spent a lot of time in hospital. There was better food in hospital and after coming out you would be given fruit to eat between meals so it was nice to go to hospital. Then one day I was told that I would be moved from Jamnagar to a new camp in the south of India in Kolhapur State called Valivade, where I finally joined my mother and sisters.

The fate of Camp Balachadi and the majority of its residents is unclear as members of the 'General Langfitt Group' who participated in this project all appear to have been transferred to Valivade within two years. There they joined a community of between 3500 and 4000<sup>5</sup> other Poles, again, mostly women and children. This refuge, provided by the government of India in support of the Legation of the Ministry of Labour and Social Services of the Polish government in London, welcomed an advance party of Poles on 11 June 1943. Their task was to create tolerable living conditions 'within this Indian wilderness' (*Polak w Indiach*, No. 18-19, 15 Sept.-1 Oct. 1944).

Over the next few years, Valivade grew into a remarkable community which is remembered fondly by those who lived there. Rows of indistinguishable barracks, made of metre-high stone walls topped by matting and tiled roofs, were transformed into picturesque homes surrounded by flower gardens, banana trees and ivy-covered walls which separated living quarters from the streets. Woven mats covered the earth floors and window curtains soon added both privacy and an individual touch to the anonymity of each family's allotted space. Most families had two rooms and a kitchenette where they prepared their own meals from supplies they were able to

purchase for themselves from the allowance they received. Some adults were able to supplement this income with paid employment around the settlement, either in administrative capacities, as teachers, health workers or in one of the various workshops. Urszula Paszkowska, who finished high school and gained a diploma of basic nursing with the Red Cross while living in Valivade, recalled that:

It was a good life materially. Everybody was fed. We were given money not provisions, so we could buy our own food. As my mother was working as a teacher her salary doubled our income so it was quite adequate for our needs. There was a good supply of shops in the centre of the settlement, there were markets just outside where vegetables could be bought and we were able to travel to Kolhàpur to get anything else that wasn't available. I was involved in the Girl Guide movement and we had some lovely camps and excursions. There were very few older boys because when they reached seventeen they were all taken to the cadet army camps in Palestine.



Valivade, 1944: main street on a Sunday morning  
(Courtesy of Boguslaw Trella)

Other adults undertook voluntary work or educational and creative courses but life was undoubtedly easier for those who were able to get paid work in the community. For those like Wiesława Paskiewicz, a teenager when she arrived in Valivade, the experience of living off basic camp rations left an enduring mark:

We had a small allowance of about forty rupees per month, enough for food and clothes. Mother did not work in the camp so we did not have any money to go to the cinema. If we wanted to go on Scouts' camps we had to pay. It was not easy if you did not have any extra money - really demeaning - so I used to help other younger children with their homework and they would pay me a little. When I finished high school I did a Red Cross course at the hospital and I promised myself that when I married I would work very hard to make sure my kids have everything.

Despite these differences, the overriding impression of the Valivade Polish settlement is one of incredible energy, organisation, achievement, and remarkable harmony. Each 'block' of barracks had a 'leader' who represented their interests on one of the five 'regional councils' which administered the whole community. Each regional council was composed of a deputy manager, health officer, chief of security service and a fire service who were responsible to their regional

manager, who was in turn responsible to the settlement's manager in the main administration. The settlement manager was also the external representative for the community in its dealings with the British authorities. The central administration had several departments dealing with finance and supplies, building and engineering, culture and education, permanent and voluntary fire service, security, postal service, servicemen's family bureau, records, physical education and health.

Within a year, the settlement became a thriving town, complete with administration buildings, a regular *Settlement Chronicle*, a church, a hospital, an orphanage, eight community centres, a theatre, and a cooperative which established a barber's shop, workshops for the manufacture of clothes, woven rugs, dolls and handicrafts, shoe repairs, and a settlement canteen and restaurant. The cooperative also ran a 'Bata' Footwear Shop on a contract basis, with the cooperative taking 25 per cent of the sales but bearing the cost of running the shop. A cabinet-making workshop supplied furniture for the schools and administration, and took private orders. An engineering workshop undertook repairs of equipment. A bricklaying and concrete section helped construct new buildings and up-grade and maintain existing buildings. As Bogdan Harbuz summarised it:

The whole system was very idealistically and patriotically based. We had good contact with what was happening during the war on different fronts, with special communiqués and our own newspapers. We could listen to the BBC radio programs which were broadcast in Polish in one of the five regional library-cultural centres where young people could also play chess, cards, or other games. There were also choirs and the central administration would organise large concerts and plays for the whole camp. We also had a cinema run by an Indian. It was like a little town of its own. Five thousand Polish people. A little Poland in India.

In 1943-44, when the Valivade settlement was first taken over by the Poles, the intention was to provide their young people with the knowledge and skills which would ensure they could contribute to the rebuilding of post-war Poland. Formal education was a high priority. At a more informal level, but with the same educational and patriotic intent, a strong Scouting Movement grew up. This focus on education characterised all the Polish refugee settlements.

By February 1946, there were three kindergartens, four primary schools and four secondary schools, staffed by 100 teachers, catering for 1977 pupils (*Polak w Indiach*, April 1946). All of these schools operated under the supervision of a school inspector who liaised with 'the Legation of the Ministry of Education and Religious Belief' in Bombay. These schools utilised teaching programs which had been adopted in pre-war Poland and school was compulsory for all healthy children. The secondary schools were divided into four major categories: a general education high school or *Gimnazjum*, and a senior secondary school or *Liceum*, a commercial school, and a school for instructors of rural management, which included a school farm for practical experience. Instruction was in Polish but, after 1945, when it became increasingly apparent that a return to Poland was unlikely, English became part of the syllabus. This was to stand many of the children in good stead in later years.

Independence for India in 1947 meant that the Polish tenure in Valivade was running out. Deeply disillusioned after the agreements signed between Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt at Tehran in 1943 and the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945 (Thomson, 162, pp. 742-4, 752), the refugees learnt that Poland was to remain under communist rule. Although about five hundred

people returned to Poland to be with relatives when a representative of the new communist government of Poland came to visit Valivade in 1946, and some 3500 left for England to join menfolk newly discharged from the armed services<sup>6</sup>, others rebelled. The Polish government representative was met with great hostility and many people refused to return home to a communist regime. For a substantial number of people, 'home' was not even in Poland any more, as the eastern regions of Poland were now firmly claimed as Soviet territory. They believed they had nothing to return to but danger. By refusing to return, they incurred the wrath of the new Warsaw government, who duly revoked their citizenship. By the time Valivade was closed in early 1948, the remaining inhabitants were not only stateless but homeless, with nowhere to go.



**Students from Valivade secondary school on excursion, India, 1946**  
(courtesy of Urszula Trella-Paszowska)

Stranded without the resources of the Polish government in exile, which was no longer recognised by Britain or the United States of America, it was now up to UNRRA to find a new refuge for these displaced persons.

Someone arrived and tried to get us to sign papers so they could move us to camps in Europe. From there we knew they would move us on to further destinations. We had heard that the conditions in the camps in Europe were horrific. But we didn't sign anything and so they couldn't really transport us to Europe. We were quite a dilemma for them and then the IRO took over from UNRRA. We heard that UNRRA had strong affiliations with the Russian regimes. We had to get out of India because the camps were being closed, so they decided to move us to East Africa because there were vacancies in some of the camps there when people from East Africa left for England to join their husbands. Adults with children went to the camp in Koja, Uganda and the orphanage went to Tanganyika. Eventually the orphans found their way to Canada. (Urszula Paszkowska)

For some people, this turn of events was a great sadness. East Africa seemed like 'the end of the earth'. But Boguslaw Trella put a different light on it:

Some people believed that they couldn't take the risk to return to Poland but with me, and

I suppose for a lot of the young people, we had become used to adventure. Our life was the sort of thing you read books about. To be quite honest, I thought that if we returned to Poland it would be grey and drab but, if we refused to go back, there would be another adventure in front of us. And we were quite right because we left India and went to Africa. That was for the youngsters who looked at the exciting part of it. It was not for the adults because their attitude was different. They did want to return to Poland, but not to a communist Poland.

### **The Settlements in East and Southern Africa**

In total, there were twenty-two different camps for Polish displaced persons, scattered throughout East and Southern Africa, all of which had been receiving Polish refugees since late 1942.<sup>7</sup> Królikowski (1983, p. 84) claims that 'the reason for this dispersal of the camps from the equator to the Cape of Good Hope remains still a secret of the British government'. Given the numbers of people involved, a simple though obvious explanation may have been the sheer logistics of supplying these people with food and necessities. In total these camps held some 19 000 people, including 3500 older men who were unfit for military service, 6000 women and approximately 8000 children, including some 1500 adolescent girls (Królikowski, 1983, p. 85). They were, as one participant observed, an 'incredible pool of femininity' who united to develop lively and creative communities in which to nurture and educate their children.

It is not possible to discuss all of these camps here, although many members of the 'General Langfitt Group' spent varying periods of time in several of them before finally being transferred to Tengeru as numbers in the other camps diminished after 1945. A brief selection of people's recollections of some of the major camps gives a sense of the community life which developed in each settlement, and the kinds of transitions which many people had to make as they were moved from place to place.

People who had been in Valivade in India remember being taken aback by the conditions they found at the Kojia settlement in Uganda. Located in a beautiful setting on a peninsula jutting out into Lake Victoria, surrounded by water on three sides and jungle and savanna on the fourth, Kojia was some 30 kilometres from the nearest railway station and 60-odd kilometres from the capital city, Kampala, too far to allow for much contact with the outside world. At its peak, Kojia accommodated around 3000 Poles. Bogdan Harbuz recalled how, when they arrived at the camp, they:

were slightly disappointed. After the luxury of India it looked rather primitive to us. The camp consisted of four administrative divisions and what we called the 'high life', the homes on the hill where the administrative workers lived. Right on top of the hill in the centre of the camp stood a church and a canteen shop.



Location of Polish refugee camps in Africa, 1942-50

(Adapted from Fr Lucjan Królikowski's book *Stolen Childhood*, 1983)

We were not given money to buy our provisions, just five shillings a month spending money. We were given provisions - some rice, flour, a bit of meat, salt, sugar, tea and coffee once a week, and most people had their own little gardens for vegetables. We felt very dependent on UNRRA for everything, including clothing. Our group from India sort of rebelled. We were not used to the strictness of the camp regulations so we tried to improve the conditions.

I was just a youngster and was more concerned with social life, high school and the Scouting movement. The rest of it didn't interest me at the time. I did not have to worry about where the next meal came from. That was my mother's worry. I liked what I saw around me: the big lake, the beautiful jungle, the animals, the fruit in the jungle, the Africans. To me it was an adventure.

Others, who were older, also recalled how they found the Koja settlement less democratic than Valivade. Urszula Paszkowska remembered it as:

a very poor existence. My mother couldn't start work because there were no vacancies. I found work in the hospital but conditions there were much more primitive than in Valivade, where we had Indians looking after toilets and cleaning floors, which was very

hard physical work. I only worked under such conditions because mother was not able to find work, but then the chief medical officer said there was a vacancy in the Polish part of the European hospital in Kampala. I went there with pleasure because they had surgical cases there and I wanted to get away from the conditions we were living under.

The conditions in Kampala were quite satisfactory. We had orderlies to clean the floors, serve the patients' meals and wash the dishes, and we had separate quarters and someone cleaning our rooms and helping in the kitchens. We worked for six weeks and then had one day free. It was not the best pay, and we worked seven days a week, but the work was interesting and I liked Kampala. The only disadvantage was that it was hard to get back to the camp so I had to correspond with my mother and brother for most of the two years we were in Uganda.

Other young adults, used to the relative freedoms of the Valivade establishment, spent their whole time in Uganda at the Kojia Camp, feeling more and more helpless with the passing of time.

Some lucky people were given jobs in camp administration, although they were paid very low salaries. My father worked in food stores where the food was issued. At the beginning I tried to get some clerical work, but on the whole Polish people were discouraged from working outside the camp. It was a very silly policy. My impression was that we were kept in the camps because they wanted to keep us together, hoping that we would all go back to Poland. I applied to the office of the IRO in Kojia and was engaged as a typist/secretary. My salary at the IRO was 120 or 140 shillings a month, which was considered very high. It was certainly more than my father was getting at the food stores. I worked there for two years. We had to keep track of all Poles living there because at that time the IRO wanted to resettle those people. There were not many takers. A Canadian mission came but they took only quite young people.

I was one of those so-called hard-core cases because I had elderly parents and it was assumed that I was the only one that could support them and that I wouldn't be able to do that. There was no hope of being resettled anywhere. I applied for residence in Kenya. I could have settled there but my parents were not accepted because of their age. My father had a lot of friends in England with whom he was in touch but it didn't seem hopeful that we would leave for England. Then the Australian Selection Commission arrived. (Regina Tabaczynski).

Meanwhile, in other parts of Africa, many other Poles were being moved from settlement to settlement, awaiting some resolution to their increasingly unpredictable futures. For example, Zbigniew Patro spent some years in the settlements at Rusape and Marandellas, before being moved to Tengeru:

I was in the group of about five hundred that went to Marandellas. One utility had been sufficient to take everyone's possessions to the camp from the railway station. So you see we had very little. At this camp Mother started to write to the International Red Cross looking for my father and to the Polish army about her older brother. We had mixed feelings because, although we now had freedom, we found out that father had died in Katyn and that my uncle had died from some disease while in the Polish army in Russia.

My grandmother's other son was in the war so she was worried about him. But life went on. For the children who were too young to understand the difficulties, life was beautiful. We were, free, the adults were working, I had many friends of my own age. We went to the dining room for food, to school and on Sunday to church.

Krystyna Jarzebowska and her sister Halina Juszczuk arrived in Africa in February 1943 and spent seven years there. During this period they moved four times. At the camp at Rusape they completed their primary schooling before moving to Digglefold, south of Salisbury, in April 1944, where a secondary school for girls had been established. Their mother joined them there to work as a seamstress a few months later. Digglefold had been a farm until the owners' 4-year-old son died in an accident. Unable to stay there with their memories, Mr and Mrs Diggle donated the farm for conversion to a school when they read about the plight of Polish refugees in the Salisbury newspapers.

Some of the expenses of running the school were paid by the Rhodesian Government, but the bulk of it was paid from the Polish gold which was taken to London at the start of the war. There were about two hundred of us there, in very lovely surroundings and we had very good teachers, all Polish people, and so Digglefold High School had a very high standard. I remember the Polish literature and language teacher best. At the beginning she taught us from memory because she had no books. She was a Polish patriot who tried to influence us with her love of Poland. She told us we must learn because one day we would go back and take our knowledge to Poland. This was very important for a country torn by war. After class there was the Scouting movement and afterwards we had craft work and dancing. There was also a library and a piano. At the front of the school we made a Polish white eagle out of shells and small white stones and created flower beds in the shape of the Polish map. It is still there because Digglefold is still a boarding school and they left the eagle as a memory of us being there during the war. The three-and-a-half-year stay in Digglefold was very pleasant. By then we had sort of forgotten the horrible things that happened to us. Being young, the wounds heal quicker than at any other time. (Halina Juszczuk)

In January 1947, as many of the African settlements were being liquidated, Halina, Krystyna and their mother were moved to Gatooma Camp in Southern Rhodesia, where they joined Poles from many of the other Rhodesian camps. Their schooling continued for another year until the schools had to close as teachers and pupils left for England and other destinations. Once again, a commission from communist Poland arrived to 'encourage' them to return to Poland, which most refused. Branded as traitors and stripped of their Polish citizenship, these 'remnants' were moved to Tengeru early in 1948.

Kidugala settlement was located in Tanganyika, near the border of Nyasaland. Królikowski (1983) estimates that there were around 1000 Polish residents at this settlement. Stanisława Jutrzenka-Trzebiatowski (Adamska) recalls her time there with great pleasure:

When I arrived I expected the land to be black, but the land is not black, the people are black. When we first arrived in Africa we were told we could go to Tengeru, Ifunda, Masindi or Kidugala. I thought about these names. Kidugala was the highest place, some 2500 metres above sea level, it was cooler and I liked the name. In May and June it was quite chilly there. We liked it there and I think it was the best camp. It was small, not like

the other camps, and we felt like one big family. We lived together in big groups and a Polish priest by the name of Maciaszek helped to keep the village in good spirits. There were lots of children there so there was a high school where I taught Polish language and geography and I was busy with Scouts and Girl Guides. It was a good time there because after the time in Russia we started to feel free. We had a very good quartermaster who taught us some English. We never thought we would ever need this language!

Jerzy Mazak was one of her pupils there:

I was in Africa from the age of twelve until I was eighteen. I arrived in June 1944 and left in 1950, so I started high school at Kidugala. Our life was interesting, with some excursions around the area. The war was still on but was coming to an end. In the camp we had a hall where we would gather and listen to the news, trying to find out what was happening. The whole thrust of our life and education was based on the assumption of going back to Poland, although we had no idea how and when. My family did not have anyone in the war but many of the people in the camp had relatives in the army so they were very much wrapped up in the war.

Tadek Gruszka and his family arrived in Dar-es-Salaam in 1944, when he was 6 years old. He did his first two years of schooling at the settlement in Morogoro, in Tanganyika, before being moved to Ifunda, where there were some eight hundred residents, for another two and a half years, and then Tengeru. He remembers his time in Africa as:

a very good life for young people, although I didn't like school very much. Africa was something different and there were a lot of things to do in the camps.

We used to go to a club - like a YMCA drop-in centre where people could get together and play games and we kids could go into the jungle and chase the monkeys. In 1946 we were moved to Ifunda where one of my brothers died. He had a cancerous growth and they couldn't do anything to save him, not in those days in the middle of the bush. I made a lot of friends in Ifunda and about four or five of us young boys used to go out to the African villages to buy eggs or a chicken when we had some money. We learnt Kiswahili quite quickly so we could speak with the villagers a little.

We were just boys who went to the bush and had a good time. Swimming, taking the dogs hunting, anything. It was great. I used to know a lot of boys from the orphanage. I think they went to New Zealand or Venezuela. They were poor kids who went all over the world. It was quite sad because we lost friends when people were sent to different camps. We were moved to Tengeru for our last two years in Africa because there were not enough people in the smaller camps.

Janusz Smenda had a somewhat different tale to recount. Initially he went to Tengeru with his mother and sister but after completing his first year of high school they received notification from the Polish Consulate in Tanganyika that the South African government was offering five places to students from Tengeru at the Pietermaritzburg College in Natal.

My mother said that this was my chance to get out of a ghetto, to get out of the refugee mentality and to learn a language. I'd had malaria and a lot of other health problems which I was just getting over and I'd started enjoying life so I didn't want to leave. But I

thought about it and decided to do it. We had to work very hard, harder because of the language although we were exempt from learning Afrikaans.

The boarding school rigour was pretty severe. We were denied hot water for showers because it was considered good for us to have cold showers to harden our bodies. This wasn't conducive to good hygiene because all the boys would just rush under the shower and splash a bit of water around. We got there just as the war was ending and there were still food shortages. We found that boarding school fare was skimpy and terribly unappetising.

Other than that, it was a delightful life simply because we had all the things that other kids in refugee camps didn't. We were well accepted both by teachers and other students. Most of us found life in Natal far more exciting than life in the camp, the only minus was being away from families. First of all there were cinemas, concerts and libraries, which did not exist in the camps initially, and there were swimming pools. The whole experience helped me tremendously because I spoke English more fluently than anyone when we came to Australia and that made it easier for me to get work and adapt.



Tengeru settlement, Tanganyika (Tanzania)  
(Courtesy of Barbara Kaluzynska)

After leaving school, Janusz Smenda found clerical work in Durban, where he also studied two units of accountancy. Earning too little to go on to university studies there, and unable to bring his mother and sister to South Africa to join him, he returned to Tengeru, believing that he had a chance of receiving a scholarship to study in England. The offer from the Australian immigration authorities in Deember 1949 changed their plans.

Tengeru settlement, in the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro, was the largest of the Polish settlements in Africa, accommodating up to approximately 4000 people (Królikowski, 1983, p. 85). Many of its residents spent up to eight years living there, and saw it transformed from a small jungle outpost into a thriving little metropolis, 'full of laughter and noise' because of all the women and children. Barbara Kaluzynska was 12 years old when she arrived there with her mother, and nearly 20 when she left.

When we arrived, there were just a few round huts and a few kitchens. The huts were just a big room made of mud bricks and covered with banana leaves. They were nice and cool in summer and quite warm in winter. At the beginning in each hut there were four

African beds (a frame with strings across it and a mattress), two tables, a lamp, bedding for four, one plate, one fork and one cup, knives and forks for four people. We were quite inventive and made furniture from cases and wardrobes from blankets. At first we shared a hut with another woman and her son but later we were given separate houses because both the women were teachers and had a lot of work to do. More houses were built and all the people who lived there did whatever they could to improve things.

Eventually Tengeru would grow to include a hospital, an orphanage for some 600 children, community halls, a beautiful church and a school of about twenty buildings which catered for primary and secondary students and taught the arts and science subjects, as well as containing a school of mechanics, an agricultural college, a commercial school and a domestic science school. The aim was to prepare the children for their uncertain futures but their education took place outside the classrooms as much as within. The Scouting movement ensured that there were regular excursions to places of interest in the region, including one-day walking tours, camps at a local farm and safaris to Olduvai Gorge and the N'Goro N'Goro volcanic crater. Many people recounted their encounters with Africa's famed wild life with undiluted pleasure: lions, elephants, rhinoceros, monkeys, as well as the beautiful bird life, the snakes and insects were a source of fascination for many of the youngsters. As several people commented, they took risks which make them shudder now, with the benefit of hindsight! After their experiences in the Soviet Union, life in Tengeru was benign.

We didn't have to worry about living conditions as we were secure. My mother was a qualified teacher but before the war had never taught because she had married early. Some taught without qualifications. Our teachers were very dedicated people and really looked after us, so if you wanted to learn you could. School was the focus for the children but for leisure time there were Scouts and Girl Guides, church activities, dances for the young people, choirs and a theatrical society - we had everything there.

Most Poles are Catholics. There were a few priests and we built a beautiful church ourselves. School children were supposed to go to church every Sunday. We were very strictly brought up. Girls, even at sixteen and seventeen, were expected to be home at ten o'clock, and there were very few older boys there because they mainly went to the army.

The camps were run by UNRRA at first and then the IRO. If you had a job you got paid and if you didn't work you got pocket money of ten shillings a month and rations. I was lucky that I did English for my matriculation, and I started reading English books quite early so I got a job as a clerk/interpreter in a little town called Arusha, about 18 kilometres from the camp. Later on I worked at the quartermaster's office as a clerk/interpreter in English/Polish. Life was very pleasant and quiet and there were few worries. (Barbara Kaluzynska)

Kazimierz Sosnowski arrived in Tengeru on his own, having been unable to find his mother in Tehran.

I realised I couldn't survive on my own so I went to the orphanage, where I lived for fifteen months, where at least I had regular meals every day. To me life in the orphanage was normal but when you start analysing things you realise it was a different experience. Each group had a caretaker and they had their favourites. I was never anyone's favourite!

I was in the middle age group but I was the tallest. Being tall, not old, they expected me to do quite a bit of work for the smaller children. We were living in two big dormitories with eleven beds in each dormitory and in between was a room where the caretaker lived. I had to take care of the younger group. Life in the orphanage - well you just did what you were told.

Mother arrived in Tengeru on 17 April 1944 and we have been together ever since. I finished primary school in Tengeru, and then went to mechanical school for three years when I was fifteen to eighteen years old. We learnt in very primitive conditions. There were not enough books for twenty-three boys. We had five books on mechanical subjects, three books for mathematics, and the teacher had to have one of these. One teacher was a qualified mechanic, there were two village blacksmiths, one qualified carpenter, one qualified joinery-maker, two well-qualified fitters. The workshop was very poorly equipped so we had to make our own tools. We were the first group of boys so we had to make everything, including our workshops.

I had several jobs after I left technical school, first as a water-pumping-station attendant in Kenya. Then I worked in a garage near Tengeru for a few months. Then there was no work, so I left and went to work in a timber mill but they didn't want a worker, they wanted someone who would supply them with females so I left. I got work on a farm as a tractor driver for two years and after that I went to Kenya again, working on the farms as a farm supervisor. I very much enjoyed my time in Africa. The scenery, the mountains, the wild animals and youthful life. Apart from malaria I didn't have any health problems. Malaria was the biggest problem in Africa.

On top of malaria, there were recurrent problems with tropical ulcers and most people gave accounts of the sand fleas which plagued the settlement at the start. These nasty little mites would creep under toe nails where they laid eggs which would grow, causing painful septic sores if the egg pouches were not removed early enough. Several people, especially children who swam regularly in Lake Daluti, contracted bilharzia, a vicious parasitic disease caused by flatworm larvae which could lodge in the intestine or bladder for years before causing major health problems. Teresa Sedzmir (née Smenda) discovered that she had contracted bilharzia after she had been in Australia for twenty-two years.

There were a number of kids from Tengeru, my age and a little bit older, who died in their twenties and early thirties. Doctors couldn't work out why. I am sure they were the victims of bilharzia. Afterwards so many of us still had it because in Africa at that time, they either cured you in a matter of months or you died.

Zdzislawa Wasylkowska, her mother Anna and sister Aleksandra Wisniewska arrived in Tengeru in 1944 after spending two years in Tehràn.

How we cried when we arrived in Tengeru! After all the civilisation in Tehràn where, although the conditions were not so good, you could at least get out, go to the pictures, and see the Persian sights and the shops. Here we were in a camp in the middle of nowhere. After a while you get used to many things. With time we made friends. You do when you are young. For my mother, who was a young woman with two children, it was no life but she just got over it.

I stayed at school until I matriculated and then I tried to get out of the camp. I got a job as a nanny in Kenya but they recognised that I was not the material for children and sent me back to Tengeru where I got a position in the school. I had no advice on how to teach. You just went to the class and did what you could. But you know, I was good at it. My mother was a teacher, my father was a teacher, three uncles were teachers. I think I was a born teacher and I looked to see how other people teach. We had hardly any resources so you improvised and tried to remember what you had learnt. The Polish army printed some school books and that was a great help. I still have some here. That was a help. Secondary school in Africa didn't have very high standards. In Tehràn yes, but not in Tengeru. Anyway we taught and we tried to learn and eventually I was teaching history, which is my favourite subject, and geography so I really liked it.

Helena Lancucka had been a teacher in Poland before the war and once she regained her health, she went back to teaching at Tengeru. She recalled the health problems, particularly malaria, which plagued many of the school children, observing that 'Africa is tough for white people'. At first there were not enough qualified teachers and they had to organise classes outside until more buildings were erected.

Initially, I was a primary teacher and then I became the administrator of the agricultural school where I also gave Polish language lessons. After our life in the Soviet Union, we were very happy. We had meals and we had school. We organised a teachers' kitchen where we paid for a cook to prepare our meals. I saw many young people grow up in Africa. Many of our pupils were eighteen or twenty years old, only girls, and many of the students were corresponding with our soldiers in England and Italy. After the war some of the girls married them. We had one sewing machine and a dressmaker who taught the girls. The other teacher taught cooking and cultivation of vegetable gardens. That was experimental because it was very different in the tropics to what we were used to. We tried growing some medical herbs and corn but when that was ripe some big animals came and ate it.

Wladyslawa Smenda was also a qualified teacher who taught at Tengeru. She had clear memories of the difficulties of teaching without resources.

It was very hard in the first weeks and months. We had nothing until we got help from the American Polish Association who sent us books. I had one lexicon (encyclopaedia) so if I forgot something that was the only thing I had for researching. It was very hard to prepare lessons because we had only the storm lamps - the kerosene lamps. I lost my eyesight because we had to make our own ruled paper for the kids in our homes at night. We had to do everything for ourselves. It was very hard at first.

Many of our students were three or four years behind so we had 18-year-olds in the first year of high school along with 12- or 13-year-olds. I was very strict and they didn't like it much then, but when they grew up they appreciated it. As a teacher you have satisfaction when you see what you are making for these children as they grow from first form to fourth form.

The camps were full of women and girls as more and more of the boys joined the army. Aleksandra Wisniewska, who finished her school years in Tengeru, reflected on the low number

of males.

Although there were hardly any men, I didn't find it strange. If you don't know something you don't miss it. But when I went out of the camp I felt very shy. This was the consequence. We used to have school dances and girls used to dance with girls. That was normal for us so, when we got to a right environment it was strange. It wasn't normal because you didn't talk to somebody different. Usually we made friends of the same age, from the same classroom, from the same school, and always females. We lived in a very protected environment. You couldn't think for yourself, you couldn't make decisions for yourself. In a way, everything was decided and done for you.

In this protected community, strong friendships were formed and these in turn nurtured a sense of responsibility and mutual obligation. Many people commented upon the law-abiding nature of the community. Irena Makowiecka summed it up:

I don't think the children in the settlement were troublesome because a lot of them were very mature and most appreciated the fact that they could study. I certainly did. Also, most children did not want to hurt their mothers, who had suffered enough already. It was unthinkable to add to their suffering and their problems. I imagine that this was the attitude of the majority of young people in Africa. My mother always looked back on the years in Africa as a holiday from life. For her, it was a very relaxing seven years because she didn't have to worry about providing food or shelter, and she didn't have to worry about me growing up and getting into mischief.

In contrast, Kazimierz Sosnowski recalled his mother's 'nervous problems' during her time in Tengeru, caused by uncertainty about the fate of her husband, grief for the two sons she had lost, and fear of her future. Maria Sosnowski, however, remembered that while 'life wasn't all that easy in Tengeru' for the adult women, they did at least feel safe. Their uncertainty about the future and the fate of their husbands and sons in the war zones were made easier to bear by the community they had created around them:

It was as if I was in Poland because I was surrounded by Polish people. There was Polish church and schools in the camp and that felt good.

Zofia Nadachowska (née Zebrowska) also reflected upon the differences between children's and their mothers' experiences of the time in the African settlements:

The children felt safe and happy in Africa but for our mothers, and for the young adult women who had passed their early teenage years, life was very limited because we were enclosed in camps surrounded by jungle. It was a stilted kind of a life. There was a sense of hopelessness because year after year we were still in the camps, getting food but not really working for our keep. I know that is how my mother and some other women felt. When the news of the Yalta treaty came it was a real blow because it killed any hope of going back to Poland. When the communist regime of Poland sent their emissaries to try and talk our mothers into going back, they knew that it would be into virtual slavery. My mother was desperate to go back because her husband and beloved eldest son were there fighting in the resistance movement. But when she wrote to her family asking if there was a possibility of her returning they said, 'Oh yes, please do come back. We have even

picked out a house for you which will be opposite your brother-in-law'. All the letters were very heavily censored at the time but we knew that my father's brother had a house in town right opposite the prison. They were telling us that mother would go to prison, so there was no going back if you didn't want to live under the communist regime.

The last years in Africa became increasingly difficult for many people plagued by sad apprehension about their eventual fate. As several commented, it was impossible to prepare themselves for the unknown and there was an escalating sense of powerlessness in the camps. Late in 1949, hope was rekindled when news filtered through the camp that an Immigration Selection Commission from Australia was due to arrive.

## [Chapter 6](#)