The General Langfitt Story

Chapter 6 - Resettlement in Australia

The Australian Selection Commission

On 20 July 1948 Mr L. de Noskowski, the Polish Consul General in Sydney, wrote to Arthur Calwell, the Australian Minister for Immigration, informing him of the existence of 'between 6000 and 8000' Poles in East Africa [8]. Noskowski had been told by Mr M. E. Raczyñski, former Polish Ambassador in Great Britain, that many of these refugees were 'young people who grew up during the war and are farmers. They speak English and would make very desirable immigrants ... there is a large number of young Polish girls who could be absorbed in Australian factories, hospitals and institutions'.

Calwell responded on 25 August 1948, saying he was already aware of the existence of this group and that 'the question of whether any steps should be taken by the Commonwealth concerning their resettlement is at present under consideration'. On 24 November 1948, Reverend A. Wierzbinski, the priest in charge of Tengeru Camp, wrote to Archbishop Tweedy of Hobart requesting his assistance, having heard of the Archbishop's interest in the fate of these refugees. Wierzbinski noted that:

> No selective mission of any country ever came to Africa and for this reason the International Refugee Organisation (IRO) plans to transfer all refugees from Africa (about four thousand) to Europe where the selective missions operate. Our people are afraid to go to Europe, because if they are not selected by any mission, they would have to stay in camps in Italy or Germany where the conditions are simply inhuman. In that case the only way for them would be to return to Poland, where they cannot return, and in case of any trouble in Europe, they would be among the first victims of communism. IRO officials here seem to have little understanding of the worries of refugees. They treat the whole affair of resettlement as a plan which must be realised with disregard to the sufferings of people. They seem to consider their position as a good job and not as an institution for helping refugees.

Lists of refugees who wished to immigrate to Australia, and one or two personal letters seeking the Archbishop's intervention, were sent to Archbishop Tweedy over the following months. By March 1949, the Archbishop was in regular correspondence with T. H. E. Heyes, the Secretary of the Immigration Department in Canberra, although he met with little initial success. In April, the Australian government had decided it did not wish to extend its selection to 'these fields', despite the fact that the IRO had agreed to share the expenses of resettling some 6000 Polish people from the refugee settlements in East Africa and Lebanon. Any people selected from East Africa and Lebanon would be an addition to the 100 000 displaced persons which Australia had agreed to take from the camps in Europe, and preliminary investigations had shown that only 'one-third' of these refugees were 'good potential immigrants'. One-third were considered 'borderline cases' and one-third 'hard core'.

Archbishop Tweedy and Mr de Noskowski, as well as the Reverend Father W. A. Nicol, Director of the Australian Catholic Immigration unit based in London, continued to plead for the

acceptance of the East African Poles (in letters dated 25 May, 3 August and 9 September 1949) and throughout May, June and July, the IRO made repeated requests that the Australian immigration authorities review their decision. The IRO charter was due to expire on 30 June 1950 and it was 'anxious to dispose of its problems outside Europe'. Major General (Rtd) C. E. M. Lloyd, Head of the Australian and New Zealand Mission to the IRO, wrote to Canberra noting that a Canadian selection commission had 'reported favourably on the physical and other qualifications' of the Polish refugees in East Africa, 'particularly the family groups'. The latest returns had shown that:

> of the 1600 people in East Africa in family groups, 800 are employable, and 800 dependants. There are, in addition, 200 unattached women with 300 minor children. A further 300 unattached women have 300 breadwinning or adult sons and daughters, and 200 minor children.

While not wanting to 'jeopardise in any way the onerous and magnificent contribution of Australia to our European problems', Lloyd urged reconsideration of the East African Poles, especially as the IRO had offered to meet the whole cost of providing an additional selection team to assess applicants from these regions (letter dated 17 July 1949). In response to this request, a letter to the First Assistant Secretary from G. C. Watson (dated 26 July 1949) noted that:

> information available from sources other than the IRO on Poles in East Africa, is somewhat sketchy, but it is known that they have already been picked over by teams from the United Kingdom and Canada who were selecting single persons but not family groups. The total number of displaced persons in East Africa receiving IRO care and maintenance as at March 1949, was stated as 4249.

An unsigned memo to the Minister at the bottom of this letter, dated 3 August 1949, recommended a selection team be sent. This was approved by Calwell two days later and by 3 September Major General Lloyd had written back to Heyes thanking them for the decision and conveying the IRO Director General's recognition of this as 'a magnificent example of that cooperation and mutual goodwill which has always characterised our relationship'. Lloyd also observed that the response from the East African camps had been most enthusiastic:

> It is reported that morale formerly waning is now very good and enthusiasm so great, that at one camp, namely Koja in Uganda, the entire camp excluding hard core and Canadian selectees have volunteered *en masse* for the Australian scheme.

This letter also contained the first tentative suggestion from J. Donald Kingsley, the IRO's Director General, that Australia review its selection criteria for this mission because of the 'detailed nature of our problem in East Africa and the Middle East'. The 'problems' were numerous. First, the number of family groups who were 'good economic units taken as a whole' but in which the head of the household was over 50 years of age was significant. Second, there were considerable numbers of single men between 45 and 55, and single women between the ages of 35 and 45, 'all physically fit and to whom it is thought that a liberalised approach would be rewarded with a disproportionate dividend and great gratitude'. Third, in East Africa there were '130 widows with minor children and a further 130 widows with adult children'. Fourth, there were some family groups, 'all eligible under Australian European selection standards but

who (had) one member with a physical disability other than T.B.'

The criteria for selection, which were to be 'rigidly adhered' to, were set out as follows in a memorandum to Heyes (dated 8 September 1949):

(i) Single men maximum age 45 years.

(ii) Single women maximum age 40 years.

(iii) Married couples without children who are prepared to accept employment which will not necessarily be together. Maximum age 45 years.

(iv) Married couples with one or more children, maximum age 50 years.

(v) Over-age parents of otherwise eligible selectees may be included provided they are fit for their age and there is a net gain in employables from the whole family group, and provided further that the employables are able and willing to maintain their over-age dependants in Australia (where over-age dependants are selected a full-time maintenance guarantee is to be obtained from the employable members of the group).

(vi) Persons of all nationalities may be selected providing they are of European race and have been admitted to displaced persons status by the IRO.

(vii) Selection of Jewish displaced persons be limited to the present 15% of total selections which operated in the selection of displaced persons in Germany.

(viii) Selection of any person within the classes (i) to (vii) to be subject to meeting medical requirements and clear security background.

Koja, Uganda, 1949: members of the Australian Selection Commission with Polish employees of the IRO (Courtesy of Boguslaw Trella)

Recruitment was to be based upon males being prepared to undertake unskilled manual work, while females were to be encouraged to take unskilled work in hospitals and similar institutions, domestic and factory work. Each applicant had to sign an undertaking that they would remain in the employment found for them by the Commonwealth for two years after arrival in Australia and were not to change their employment without the consent of the Minister for Immigration.

After this time, if they had 'proved satisfactory in every respect', they would be entitled to remain in Australia. Residency did not entitle them to nominate relatives or friends for admission to Australia at a later date as these would be considered on their individual merits and be determined by existing policy.

On 7 October 1949, the Australian Selection Mission, headed by Mr Allan Joynes, [9] finally left Australia to interview and select displaced persons from settlements in Cairo, Lebanon [10] and East Africa. Meanwhile, Lloyd had once again requested that Australia relax the existing age limitation on the eligibility of single men to 50 years of age and of single women to the age of 45, as this would increase the number of available candidates by three hundred, 'all of whom are completely able to maintain themselves' (letter to Heyes dated 14 October 1949). This was agreed to on condition that this decision did not set a precedent for selection teams operating in Europe and that particular attention be paid to the health and general physical condition of the older age group (cablegram to Joynes, dated 14 October 1949). By 26 October, Joynes had been ordered to extend these new age limits to couples without children and to 'unmarried mothers', meaning unaccompanied women with children under 13, of whom there were fifty in East Africa who had previously been ineligible for selection.

After almost three weeks in Cairo and Beirut, the Australian Selection Commission finally arrived in Nairobi where they started interviews with five people in Nairobi, all of whom were accepted, before proceeding to Tengeru and Koja. On 9 November, Joynes reported that 'the Displaced Persons in this area are of a particularly good robust type, a fair proportion of them being very healthy children and young people under 18 years of age who are accompanying parents under 50 years of age'.

The Medical Officer's Report on Tengeru (dated 1 December 1949) noted that 1414 people were examined, of whom 893 were accepted and 474 rejected, with 47 pending further investigation of various medical matters. Fifty were rejected for 'obvious medical deformities, such as loss of limbs etc', so that 1364 people were medically examined in eighteen working days at an average of seventy-six people a day. It was found necessary to ignore previous medical examinations conducted by medical personnel at Tengeru because they did not understand the requirements of the Australian immigration authorities, although the Medical Officer Dr J. B. Mathieson was at pains to note that the hospital at Tengeru appeared to be run very efficiently. Details of the medical examinations procedure were included in the report and particular attention was paid to the problem of malaria, which Mathieson considered had become something of 'an obsession' with residents in the settlement. 'Any headache, fever or gastrointestinal upset is diagnosed as malaria'. From 1 December 1949 all accepted migrants were placed on Paludrine, the anti-malarial drug recommended to Mathieson by the British army. They were also given inoculations against smallpox and yellow fever, TB and, for the children, a diphtheria prophylactic. Mathieson was:

> most impressed with the Polish people of this camp. They are a very fine type and, I am sure, will make good New Australians. The children are remarkably healthy and fine, intelligent, physical types. The children and adolescents would compare more than favourably with any cross-section of Australians of similar age groups. The accepted migrants consist principally of women, children and adolescents. The low numbers of single males are accounted for by the fact that the Canadian Mission had confined its

> selection practically to this group. [11]

Dr Mathieson also praised the organisation of the IRO staff, Mr Arnold Curtis and Mrs Mollie Rule in particular, and the facilities placed at his disposal, including his staff of one Czech doctor and his wife, an ex-medical student, who assisted with X-rays, blood pressure readings, urine and vision testing. Two nursing sisters, one male and one female interpreter also assisted. IRO staff and the Camp Commandant and his staff 'showered hospitality' upon the Australians and made sure they were suitably accommodated and entertained. They were even treated to 'trips of great interest'. After selection procedures were completed, Mathieson addressed all the accepted migrants, issuing them 'a most sincere welcome to our wonderful country'. He continued:

> You will find the Australian people one of the most democratic in the world. You will find you are in a land where class distinction has little or no significance. Although you will always have memories of pleasant associations with the land of your birth, we expect that you will never forget that you are now, first and foremost Australians. You will be placed in remunerative employment as soon as possible under the same conditions of employment and payment as the Australian workers. We wish you every happiness, success and prosperity, and on behalf of the Commonwealth of Australia we extend to you a most cordial welcome.

Although the term 'New Australian' was not used in the official version of this welcoming speech, many people recalled the use of the term. Some welcomed it as a sign of acceptance. Others felt uneasy because, as Zbigniew Patro explained:

> We had decided to come to Australia but one thing struck me: one of the people from the Commission said that from now on we would be called 'New Australians'. Ever since we left Poland we had been different from others. Now I wanted to settle in this country, why should we be called something different? Why 'New Australian'? Why not just 'Australian'?

There were no detailed medical reports made for the Koja settlement, but the Australian Commission spent just over two weeks there in December processing 727 people, of whom 308 were accepted and 419 rejected. [12] The Australian Selection team then returned to Nairobi to finalise the 'pending cases' from Tengeru. They left East Africa for Cairo, Beirut and Greece on 21 December 1949 and returned to Australia on 25 January 1950, after having accepted a total of 2344 people over the course of their whole mission. A final total of 1221 people had been accepted from the Tengeru and Koja settlements (report by Mathieson dated 15 February 1950).[13] The Selection Commission had been strongly commended by the Head of the IRO Mission in East Africa, who deeply appreciated their 'excellent job of selection' and 'genuine human interest in our refugees ... while loyally serving Australia's interests' (letter from H. A. Curtis to Joynes, dated 20 December 1949). Mr James Kemp, the Information and Welfare Officer, left the Australian Mission in Athens, returning to East Africa to join the selected migrants on their journey to Western Australia aboard the USAT *General W. C. Langfitt*, which departed from Mombasa on 2 February 1950 (report to Heyes from Joynes dated 27 January 1950). According to the passenger list of the *General Langfitt*, there were 297 people from the Koja Camp and 832 from the Tengeru Camp, making a total of 1129 people. The discrepancy in the figures cannot be accounted for.

One final proviso is worth noting: the Australian Department of Immigration had made sure that it secured an agreement with the British authorities in Tanganyika and Uganda stating that both territories would accept the re-entry of any 'undesirables' who had crept through the selection process up to a period of twelve months after arrival in Australia, assuming that the IRO camps there were still in operation (letter from Lloyd to Heyes, dated 9 January 1950). These Polish displaced people, although accepted as New Australians, were thus placed on probation for the first year of their residence in Australia.

People who were living at the Koja and Tengeru settlements have clear memories of the visit of the Australian Selection Commission, for this provided them with their only knowledge of Australia prior to arrival. Many people commented upon the friendliness of the Selection Commission and the humane, considerate way in which the officers handled each application, especially in comparison with the rigid adherence to selection criteria shown by the Canadian mission, which had taken only single men and women and childless couples under 40 years of age.

Nevertheless, as Zofia Skarbek noted, 'we still had to go through a health check. We had to have X-rays, blood tests and urine tests. I think people with TB were excluded. There were some illnesses which were excluded no matter how humanitarian they were'. Many people found this a demeaning experience. It was clear that 'labour-value' was the primary consideration, but as more than one person observed ' 'We knew that beggars are not choosers. That is how it was'. Regina Tabaczynski likened the selection process to 'selecting horses in the market place. Health was the major criterion, not education, because they were taking us for labourers and housemaids and workers'. Aleksandra Wisniewska recalled that:

> You had to strip to your underpants and they looked you up and down and poked you here, there and everywhere to ensure that you were healthy. They were not exactly delicate. A bit rough and abrupt: 'Turn. Bend.' It was humiliating in a way, but you had to be fit to work. That was the whole purpose. I was pumped up with vitamins so I would be healthy for physical work and some people went to extremes to get fit. But there were some families who were separated because one member wasn't fit enough.

The age limits created problems for many families. As Zofia Skarbek explained:

> My mother was forty-three, I was school age and my brother came here on contract, but we had an aunt who survived Russia with us. We had never been parted but she was not eligible for entry to Australia because she was over fifty. This was so heartbreaking. The age was forty for women (the age limit was later increased) and forty-five for men. It was a very difficult time for us because we thought after ten or twelve years we would have to be parted and we didn't know where my aunt would go. Then some friends who had two boys who were of an age to work declared that my aunt was a relation so she was allowed to come as a refugee-migrant. It is debatable at what level they brought us here because in a way we came as refugees, in a way we came as migrants on contract. It was not really clear.

Although the age limit had been reviewed to include women up to the age of 45 as eligible for work contracts, those who were physically fit had to sign two-year contracts along with their children. Krystyna Jarzebowska's mother was 'two years too old. She was 47 and healthy for her

age, but they took us because my sister and I were young and healthy. We had to sign a document to say that we would look after her, even though she had to sign a two-year contract as well. Still, I was happy that they took us.'

Single young women with two over-age parents were considered particularly 'hard core' cases and most remained ineligible for migration unless they could find a friend to conjointly sign a guarantee of upkeep. Several young people, like Bogdan Harbuz, ended up coming to Australia on their own. Other members of his family had been rejected on age and health grounds.

> I was accepted because I was sixteen and I was healthy. Tropical diseases such as bilharzia, amoebic dysentery and malaria actually didn't mean very much to the Australian Commissioners. They were not familiar with those diseases, so I passed all the tests and the medical examinations. I was promised by one of the Commissioners that on arrival in Australia young boys like me would be put into school, that I would be trained and I would be an asset to Australia. Unfortunately on my arrival I found out that I was under a two-year government contract the same as everybody else and that I had to work wherever I was sent. I was promised that within a year or so my mother would join me, and then I could bring my brother-in-law and sister to Australia, that there would be no objection once I established myself in Australia. It didn't eventuate that way. But to me Australia was a place to go. It was very exotic, very far away and a place to see.

Others chose to take up the offer from the Australian Selection Commission even when they had prospects of going elsewhere. Wladyslawa Smenda, her son Janusz and daughter Teresa had been offered residency in East Africa, passages to Argentina and Canada, and were likely to gain admission to the United Kingdom. However, they were told that Western Australia had a university where students could gain scholarships which covered the fees, and Wladyslawa was keen to avoid the cold of Canada, especially after years living in the warmth of East Africa. She also wanted to 'get as far away from Russia as possible'. This sentiment was shared by many people.

Thus, in late January 1950, within five months of their first intimation that Australia might offer them refuge, over 1000 Poles who had seen out the war from their remarkable, protected settlements in India and Africa were transported to Mombasa, where they boarded the USAT *General W. C. Langfitt* which was to take them to their adopted homeland. Conditions aboard the *General Langfitt* were hot and cramped. It was, according to Jerzy Mazak, 'a troop carrier, 11500 tons, a long, tall, squeaky ship'. The journey took fourteen days, one week of which was through high storms. A few people who worked in the IRO office on board were able to secure cabins for elderly parents, but the vast majority of people slept in the 'big halls' allocated to males and females which contained around 140 bunks, stacked in layers of six. Many of the youngsters were employed in the kitchens and dining rooms, or as cleaners of the toilet blocks, understandably the least popular of tasks, especially when bouts of seasickness swept through the passengers.

Young people on the voyage from Africa to Australia 1950,

The names L - R: J Dobrostanski, J Ciechanowski, M Pilczynska, J Lis, B Trella, W Marten.

This image was not included in the original publication.

First Experiences in Australia

It was with considerable relief that they awoke early on the morning of 14 February 1950 to witness sunrise from Gauge Roads outside Fremantle. Ryszard Pawlowski spoke for many of the young men who were:

> standing on the deck looking at Fremantle from a distance, trying to imagine what Iife would be like in this new, strange place. But we were used to travelling from one place to another so I don't think I expected to stay here. I thought we would be here for a few years and then we would go somewhere else. I think most people had that in mind.

They were to be greeted by a spectacularly hot day, with the temperature reaching 105°F (40°C) on their first day in their new country. Irena Makowiecka summed up the joy and anticipation felt by most of her compatriots, 'At last we had arrived somewhere which was normal. Now let's see what we are worth? What can we do? It was up to us now'.

Disembarkation at Fremantle, Western Australia, February 195O

(Courtesy of Irena Makowiecka)

It is not possible to do justice to all the post-arrival experiences which participants in this project shared but it was quite clear that Australian 'normality' was going to take some getting used to. Barbara Kaluzynska recalled her feelings on arrival:

> After leaving beautiful green Mombasa we arrived in Fremantle where there were little tin barracks and lots of concrete. There was nothing there. I didn't want to get out and said, 'I'm going back to Africa'. I started crying. My mother said that maybe it is not so bad and that, anyway, we couldn't go back. She was more philosophical about it than I was. As soon as I got off the ship a lady from the YWCA asked me,'How do you like Australia?' What could I say! We were each given a pie, an orange, a piece of fruit cake and an apple by the YWCA.

Boguslaw Trella, along with several of his young friends, remembers that the first thing that struck him as 'extremely strange was to see white people working as wharfies. We had got used to black people doing the manual jobs in Africa or even India. Then we realised that this was to be our fate too!'

> After scrambling to find their meagre luggage, which had been dumped unceremoniously on the North Wharf, [14] all the passengers from the *General Langfitt* were immediately transported to the Migrant Transit Camps at Cunderdin and Northam.

> We boarded a train. It was hot. At Midland Junction there was a pile of hot pies beside the railway track which we were given. Nobody could taste them. It was getting hotter and hotter. We saw some tents along the railway line and eventually we arrived in Cunderdin. Everything was organised there but it was a disappointment. It was such flat country, nothing but sheep, lots of flies and a hot wind. That was not a charming place to

be! But we were not there long before my mother and sister were sent to work in Bunbury. (Zdzislawa Wasylkowska)

Migrant transit camp, Northam, Western Australia, 1950

(Courtesy of Boguslaw Trella)

Regina Tabaczynska remembered that:

> everything seemed so very primitive, even after East Africa! Even the food was primitive. It was steak and eggs and peas and cooked cabbage. That was all. For me, it was the end of the world but I was glad that at last I would start life, that soon I wouldn't be in a camp, sheltered. After all those years when we had to do what we were told, I was glad that at long last I would be able to do what I wanted, that I would be on my own to manage as best I could. I would be responsible.
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> Soon after we arrived in Northam camp my father got a letter from one of our friends in England who was in Polish education there. He wrote that Poles who arrived in England would be sent to a camp and that he had arranged everything for us. My parents would be in the camp and he had already found me a place in a university. I felt terrible. Imagine! In Australia I didn't have the slightest chance to be sent to university. I had to support my parents.

Other people enjoyed their time in the transit camps. Some of the boys and young men took to exploring their new environment with gusto and recall going to the movies, raiding local orchards and swimming expeditions in the Avon River. English lessons were remembered with wry humour by many as they entailed groups of about twenty people standing in front of a teacher, singing Australian songs and repeating English words endlessly. Krystyna Jarzebowska spent about six weeks in the Northam camp where they:

> mixed with people from all over Europe. We had a good time. They organised dances and there were such a lot of men! We were longing for the company of men after having lived in Africa for so long with mostly women and girls. At the Northam camp we had English classes every day. I learnt a lot of Australian songs! We had to learn them and sing to the teacher! I knew some basic English from Africa, although I never had a chance for conversation, only reading. Speaking is very different. We knew the words but we didn't know how to use them. After six weeks they started sending us to start our contracts.

People had a variety of experiences in their first jobs, ranging from extremely positive

introductions to Australian working culture to demoralising drudgery. A few young adults who had competency in English found work with the Department of Immigration and the Commonwealth Employment Service as clerks, typists or interpreters, but most, as expected, had to see out their contracts in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Many young men were sent to Mundaring Weir to work on the construction of the dam, while others were sent to work on farms, building railways or to factories. Some of the older men were given menial jobs as cleaners while women were allocated work in factories and laundries, or sent to hotels, hospitals and schools as cleaners and domestics. Of the young women who had acquired experience as nurses during their time in India or Africa, only Urszula Paszkowska was able to take up a training position. In 1951 she became the third non-Australian to be admitted to the nursing school at Royal Perth Hospital. Others, like Krystyna Jarzebowska, her mother and sister Halina were unlucky enough to be sent to isolated rural communities, where they were unashamedly exploited by their employers. As Halina Juszczyk recalled:

> these people never could keep their staff any longer than a few weeks. Here they had three women, all young and strong and bound to them for two years. They made our lives hard. We were not allowed to have a shower every day because of the water supply problems. The owner made excuses so we could not attend the Roman Catholic mass which was held every second week. He also withheld our correspondence for months at a time. We found out about this from the postmistress, who was very sympathetic to us.
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> After six months we couldn't put up with it any more. We said, 'This is not a labour camp in Russia. This is Australia. People must not be treated the way we are'. The postmistress advised us not to return to Perth because there they had more contacts with migrants and might not be very sympathetic. She said to go north to Geraldton, so we bought bus tickets and left with threats from the hotel owner that we would be arrested and sent back where we came from. That was impossible! Even if they had sent us back to this hotel we decided that they couldn't force us to work. We knew that much about Australia - it was a democratic country where you can't be forced to do these things.

Such experiences would be familiar to many post-war migrants who came to Australia on similar terms. Conditions were made even harder by the shortage, and thus the expense, of accommodation in the postwar period and every person had tales of boarding in other people's houses, sharing rooms and kitchen and bathroom amenities. In several cases finding accommodation was made harder by prejudices against 'New Australians' and finding a good place to stay was frequently a matter of simple good fortune. However, the strong sense of community which had been forged throughout the time in the refugee settlements in India and East Africa came to the fore, and friends helped each other as much as they could. Zofia Nadachowska, who talked her mother into letting her leave school early to help with the family finances, found a job as a waitress in a guest house in Perth. She shared one room with three friends:

> It was a tiny room with one window and a tiny wardrobe and dressing table. There were two narrow iron beds, pushed together under the window and the three of us slept there. The room was so small that when we had to undress, one would sit on the beds, the other would wait in the passage way. We would take turns until we all got into bed. The beds had sagging springs and narrow mattresses that sank in so the one who was in the middle was sleeping on the join. We very democratically took turns, rotating around the bed.

> One time a friend of ours who had lost her job and had nowhere to sleep came to ask if she could stay, so there were four of us, like sardines! We would go: one two three, turn to the left; one to three, turn to the right! Because we were young and silly we saw the funny side of it and giggled and giggled. Everything was fun then and we laughed at ourselves. I think that silliness saved us.

It was harder on the older women, the mothers who had once harboured such strong hopes of returning to Poland. Many of them only discovered the fate of their husbands after they arrived in Australia, so they had to let go of any remaining hopes that they might yet be reunited and confront their futures as widows. Time and distance did not lessen their grief. They also had to adapt to new circumstances in an English-speaking nation, where they had few supports except their family and friends, and the occasional helping hand from other more established Australians, many of whom had little comprehension of, and even less desire to acquaint themselves with, the circumstances which had brought these people to Australia. It seemed that many people did not even know where Poland was. As Zenon Zebrowski observed, 'it was amazing how ignorant many Australians were. They would confuse Poland with Holland!'

Maria Sosnowska recalled how hard she found the first years in Australia. While in East Africa she had been surrounded by her compatriots in a 'little Poland', but in Australia she 'felt estranged from Poland. It hit me then that there was no way back. Part of the reason I broke down soon after arriving was that it was so strange for me'. Other women had been hopeful that they might be able to resume work for which they had been trained. Stanislawa Jutrzenka-Trzebiatowska (Adamska) spent six hard months learning English:

> hoping that I would find work as a teacher because I had good papers and good references. But I was told not to hope too much because Australians are very jealous and it would be very hard to get a job as a teacher. And it was true. After six months I found that I had very little chance. They were expecting me to work a two years contract. I didn't know much about hospitals but somebody advised me that there was work in hospital kitchens so three of us went to Royal Perth Hospital. I worked there with Mietka Gruszka's mother, Maria Szuster-Nowak for many years.

Helena Lancucka had been a teacher for fourteen years in Poland before the war, but knew that she would have to take whatever work she could when she arrived in Australia so that she could send her 14-year-old son to high school. Initially she worked in the hospital laundry of the Cunderdin Camp, where all the washing was done by hand.

Cunderdin Camp, Western Australia, 1950

(Courtesy of Barbara Kaluzynska)

> It was very heavy work and I got sick. After that they gave me better work cleaning and scrubbing the floors in the hospital. Sometimes I washed the children and after a while the sister in charge said I could give them injections but I did not like the nursing duties.There was one Catholic lady from Perth who belonged to a charitable organisation. She told me through an interpreter that they wanted my son to be a postman. I said he was too young so she said that she would try to put my son in a Christian Brothers School. In October he went to the school and she found me work as a cleaning lady in Perth at the Sacred Heart Convent. I lived in the convent but it was a very small wage - only £3 for a week and that £3 I gave for the board and education of my son. I had to work every day because there was no-one to help us, no-one. But my son graduated and went on to university and now he is a scientist with the CSIRO. He has three children, two of whom are at university and one is doing school matriculation.

Wladyslawa Smenda, another trained and experienced teacher, did much the same, working as a domestic at Northam Camp for two years while her daughter Teresa became a monitor for the Education Department at a school in Cunderdin. As her son Janusz observed:

> I think most of us adapted quite well but it was more difficult for the older people. My mother was then fifty and her English wasn't anywhere near good enough to work as a teacher. She had about £50 and I had £5 when we came here. That was the sum total of our possessions, plus a few personal things. Mum started work as an office cleaner so I could go to uni full time. In that sense she sacrificed a lot of her time for us.

This was a theme common to many: mothers' determination to improve the lot of their children. Ryszard Pawlowski finished his contract and then:

> decided to go to the bush where I worked in the timber mill in the south-west. After that job I came back to Perth, mainly due to my mother insisting that we should try and improve ourselves by doing some kind of a course. She used to say, 'You don't want to be a labourer all your life and work in factories. Try and do something'. She kept insisting and encouraging us, so I started going to English classes at night school. All that time I was attending a course in mechanical drafting at Perth Technical College but it wasn't easy in those days to get employment in Perth. I was trying to get something in line with what I was doing at school. A friend who was in Melbourne wrote me a letter saying that there were more opportunities in Melbourne so I moved to Melbourne in 1957.

Many of the young adults who were unable to resume studies because of the work contract and the need to earn a living commented upon the inhibitions this placed upon their future prospects, although many later resumed studies, either in conjunction with working or raising a family. Where this was not directly related to improving job prospects, it was undertaken for the sheer satisfaction of the achievement - a legacy, perhaps, of the efforts of their Polish teachers in India and Africa, a youthful training which focused upon a 'useful and productive life'. It was also a way of showing their gratitude to the mothers who had brought them through so much to reach freedom.

The Younger Folk

These brief and severely edited 'cameos' offer just a glimpse of some of the ways in which many of the children who arrived on the *General Langfitt* maximised the opportunities to improve their individual and family circumstances. While the following examples focus upon educational achievements which led to professional careers, it is clear that many others found their niches in other areas such as the skilled trades and small business.

Over 30 per cent of the 'General Langfitt Group' were children under 12 years of age and an even higher proportion were still under 16 when they arrived in Western Australia. They started school soon after at schools set up in the Northam and Cunderdin camps. There were no English classes specifically for children and the school teachers appeared to have had little experience with children from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Nor were there any appropriate strategies in place or suitable teaching materials. A few children went to local Catholic schools until such time as their parents were allocated work elsewhere. Some, like Tadek Gruszka, started apprenticeships in their mid-teens, but many others were accepted into various Catholic schools in Perth and Geraldton after negotiations conducted by their Polish priest, Reverend Father Witold Dzieciol.

It seems from various accounts that once in school, the quality of the Polish children's education depended greatly on the ability of the staff to adapt their teaching styles to the needs of new students grappling with the English language. Mietka Gruszka, in an essay on her school days in Australia, explained, 'We were the first big group of non-English-speaking youngsters to land on West Australian shores after the Second World War and the education system was not ready for us'. Three months after arrival in Western Australia, Mietka and three friends, including Halina Szunejko, left their mothers in Cunderdin to board at Santa Maria Ladies College in Perth. There the teachers hoped:

> that with perseverance, patience and the grace of God, they would be able to mould these 'New Australians' into good and useful Aussie citizens. By the luck of the draw, the four of us came to Santa Maria to begin our 'sink or swim' adventure with Australian schooling. Later, three more Polish girls joined us for a short time, but only Halina and I remained at the school for five years. Our arrivaI caused quite a sensation and a challenge for both nuns and the fellow boarders, but they made great efforts to communicate with us and make us feel welcome ... On the first week-end of every month we were allowed to go home. Those weekends were a return to a different world, the world of our Polish families, Polish community functions and friends we grew up with in Africa. As the years went by, our English improved and we were able to pass our junior examinations and two years later, our Leaving examination. Both Halina and I decided to follow a teaching profession.

Halina Szunejko, who went on to become the first Polish woman in Western Australia to be awarded the Order of Australia (1989) for her services to education and the Polish community, credited 'the women in my life, especially the nuns at Santa Maria Ladies College, who put forward the options available to us and pushed us in the direction of teaching'. In a career that has so far spanned thirty-seven years, teaching both primary and secondary students, further studies in educational administration and research, and five years as principal of one of Perth's largest high schools, one of Halina's most memorable appointments was her first two years of

teaching at a two-teacher school near Collie. The challenge of teaching young Australian children to read and write delighted the young woman who, only eight years before, had arrived in Australia with no knowledge of the English language. She recalls in particular the joy of guiding a young Italian girl who started the year with no English language skills to the point where she became top of the class at the end of the year. Even more importantly, it was at this time that her family received news that their application to bring out their father and sister from Poland had been successful. After seventeen years, her whole family was reunited.

Zenon Zebrowski was twelve and a half years old when he arrived in Western Australia. His mother and two elder sisters were keen for him to continue his education so it was arranged that he would spend a year at Clontarf Boys Town, along with a few other young Polish boys, so that they 'could learn English quickly'. He considered that this time at Clontarf was:

> one of the best things that happened to me. The life was fairly harsh there because there were about eight brothers looking after two hundred kids, nearly all of them were either genuine orphans or from broken homes. They were rough as bags and the brothers had to control them. Some other Polish boys who went to Clontarf couldn't bear it, but after I had survived that, little things didn't worry me! After Clontarf I went to Christian Brothers College in Perth. There were sixty-four of us in the class and one brother to teach all the subjects and control us. There were only two 'New Australians' there, myself and a Ukrainian chap, and an Australian-Italian who was born just after his parents arrived in Australia in 1937. The attitude of the children was strange. They would look at our lunches and go, 'Ugg! How can you eat that greasy food? 'We would say, 'It's delicious! You should try it'. They wouldn't. I found it quite easy to adjust and didn't have any problems. it was easy to make friends through sport.

Zenon finished his secondary education and won a Commonwealth Scholarship to study Arts, majoring in economics at the University of Western Australia. However, when his mother became too sick to work, he converted to part-time studies so that he could earn money to keep them both. When it became impossible to find work, they moved to Melbourne, where one of his sisters was living with her husband. Believing that he could not complete his degree from the University of Western Australia, he studied for a Bachelor of Commerce at Melbourne University, only later discovering that he could complete his first degree by correspondence. Thus, with a 'lot of hard slog', he acquired a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Western Australia and a Bachelor of Commerce from Melbourne University, going on to work in the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics and, later, the Department of Defence. After thirty years working in the public service, Zenon reflected that there was:

> Insidious discrimination, often nothing you could put your finger on, like promotions which would get rolled on appeal. I never complained about it. As time moved on a name like Zebrowski wasn't unusual, but in 1960 when I first joined the public service I was a rarity. Most people with 'New Australian' names worked in factories. By the time I retired it seemed that every second person had a 'New Australian' name and an ethnic background. Most of that discrimination is disappearing, except maybe from very high positions in corporate structures where there are still some 'troglodytes' left! Generally speaking, Australia has changed tremendously. It is not as insular any more.

Fourteen-year-old Zofia Skarbek went on to complete her high school education at St Joseph's

Convent and Leederville Technical College in Perth. She left Western Australia for a visit to Melbourne where she met her future husband, a fellow Pole and medical student, and decided to stay in Melbourne. It was fifteen years and three children later, combined with invaluable experience as her husband's 'receptionist/nurse', before she returned to university to complete her psychology degree. Since then she has worked as a psychologist with the Department of Employment, Education and Training.

Making a Home in Australia

The development of a strong Polish community in the years after settlement was perhaps an inevitable off-shoot of the patriotism common to most Polish Australians, a characteristic shared by the Polish diaspora across the globe. As Pakulski (1988, p. 743) noted in an assessment of Polish community life in Australia:

> Strong national and religious identity, shared experiences of war, migration and resettlement, geographical proximity and initial social isolation helped to develop and maintain strong community ties amongst the post-war immigrants, and facilitated the formation of voluntary organisations and ex-servicemen's groups.

Such activities included the creation of Polish Roman Catholic congregations, where the Mass, given by a Polish priest, could be heard in Polish, as well as voluntary organisations which promoted self-help and the strengthening of collective ties. Sporting clubs, particularly soccer, Polish houses where groups could meet for a variety of purposes, libraries, coffee shops, and cultural ensembles to retain traditional Polish dance and songs, provided more avenues for community participation, while the Polish associations played a key role in representing Polish interests in the broader community. Polish welfare organisations also served the purpose of maintaining strong links with Poland, for most Australian Poles retained a keen interest in events in their homeland. While many of these groups were primarily concerned with the retention and transmission of Polish national, religious and political values, they helped to forge a distinct place for Poles within the Australian community.

Regina Tabaczynska, whose parents and husband were founding members of the Polish Association in Perth, recalled how important these community ties could be:

> there were times in the first few years when I felt very alienated from everything and everybody so, as a therapy, I decided that I would work in the Polish Association. There was a Polish Club in Northbridge and we had social evenings where we would organise discussions and dances. There was also a Polish library - not many books but still occasionally I was on duty there. The Polish Association and Polish contacts were very important when we first came here because Australians were not too kind to foreigners who spoke a different language. Very often you would be told on the street, 'Don't talk that language. Speak English!' It was extremely unpleasant.

Ruth Johnson noted in her study of Polish settlers to Western Australia that many post-war Polish migrants to Australia placed a special emphasis on the preservation of their language, 'deeply convinced of the role that language plays in the perpetuation of Polish culture abroad' (Johnson, 1988, p. 741). Many of the participants in this project reflected that sentiment; most have encouraged their children to learn Polish by speaking it in the home and by sending them to

Polish language classes organised by the Polish associations. While it appears to be harder to do the same with grandchildren, many grandparents continue to speak to their grandchildren in Polish, aiming to keep alive the relationship between cultural heritage, patriotism and language.

Troupes of Polish Scouts were also established in both Perth and Melbourne to help pass on the values of patriotism and good citizenship to second generation Polish Australians. In Melbourne, the Polish community acquired 4.5 hectares of bushland in Healesville, 70 kilometres from Melbourne, to build a youth centre named 'Polana',[15] where each summer, children of Polish post-war migrants could go to enjoy the environment and have the lessons of their Saturday classes in Polish language, history and geography reinforced. It is a beautiful facility, with a cottage for a caretaker who facilitates the use of the centre for any groups or organisations who require it. Instead of serving the needs of the Polish community only, 'Polana' is now open to the whole Australian community, thus providing a metaphor for the varied ways in which members of the Polish community have taken Australia into their hearts.

Over the forty years since they arrived in Fremantle, members of the 'General Langfitt Group' appear to have adapted remarkably smoothly, and successfully, to life in Australia. Given that they were initially considered to be a 'high risk' group of immigrants, a substantial proportion of whom had grown up in single-parent families, participants in this project were asked what factors may have contributed to this transition. The role of community organisations, particularly the Polish Scouting movement which focused upon youth, were emphasised by many people. Zofia Skarbek considered that the Polish Scouts fostered the young people's interests in music, acting and dancing and prepared them to become 'fully functional citizens'. In addition, the schools in the Polish settlements in India and Africa, where most of these young 'New Australians' had received their earliest formal education, 'had very high moral standards, with a strong focus on religious education: it was a moral fibre thing, not training us to become like nuns and brothers in Catholic schools'.

While all these factors were important, Zofia Skarbek summed up the sentiments of many of her compatriots by attributing the 'success' of the 'General Langfitt Group' primarily to:

> our mothers. They were the ones who actually made it and made it fast. I think the way they brought us up was fantastic because they had very high standards, morals and ethics. There weren't too many troublemakers amongst their children so I think it was our upbringing. Our mothers had to be very tough to survive and go through Russia and bring us up in all of that.

Zofia Nadachowska also expressed this sentiment succinctly:

> When I think of my mother I think of all other mothers. She was a symbol of all other mothers. From a very gentle person she became a lioness. It transformed her because she had to fight for the survival of her children. That was her main purpose in life. She pulled us through by hook or by crook.

Barbara Kaluzynska suggested that being part of a one-parent family is today considered a disadvantage, but that as a group this factor did not hold them back.

The thing I want to stress is that we were all brought up in one-parent families. All of us in the 'Langfitt Group' did well, we all had good jobs, a business, or a university degree. There was a

lot of importance placed on religion, a lot of stress on girls not being promiscuous, and our teachers had a great deal of influence on us.

In the course of interviews, many people commented briefly upon the fact that the 'General Langfitt Group', like all the displaced persons of the 1940s and 1950s, made their transition to Australian life with few support services and without the help of counsellors. Zofia Skarbek considered that this was because,'We had friends, we had mothers, we had uncles and aunts. It was amazing because it was very much a matriarchal community'. Janusz Smenda, also an experienced psychologist, considered this question and postulated:

> with the benefit of hindsight, that we were a very resilient group and an amazingly well-adjusted group for people who were in such an unusual series of circumstances, including traumas like war, loss of husbands, looking after small children, coping all of a sudden because there was no-one else to cope on their behalf. We had certainly no counselling available. There were none of the support systems that are in place now for migrants, certainly nothing like women's affairs advisers. A predominant number of these ladies would have benefited from this kind of support, including career support, finding out what opportunities there were, help to place their kids at schools. Yet we didn't feel that we were dumped or that nobody cared. Everybody just started their own life and got on with it. We had been for so long in such a deprived condition, and were not used to a welfare state. Anything we found here was a bonus. We were never really preconditioned to handouts.

The resilience of the group was also stressed by Bogdan Harbuz:

> We were survivors. We had to fight. We had things hard all the time and Australia wasn't the hardest place. It was easier than Siberia or other places. So just because you didn't have a job one day, or something like that, you never went hungry. You could borrow money. You could buy things and you knew that most probably in a couple of days you would get a job. Another thing was that for quite a number of years our community in a sense was assimilating but in a sense was very patriotic and kept together. We were observing our customs and also, because we came from a certain part of the world, we felt brotherhood, friendship, mateship. As a community we decided that we could stand on our own two feet. If we had managed so far,we could manage still. And that was most probably the reason for being able to survive and improve our situation.

There was clearly a lot of mutual support within the 'African' Polish community, although many people commented that they very rarely talked together about specific details of their war experiences. Even so, the events which took them to India and East Africa, their experiences there and in the Soviet Union, set them apart from their many compatriots. Many other Poles who came to Australia in the post-war years had entirely different, frequently lengthier, 'more traumatic' experiences of war and displacement in Germany, if one can indeed measure the individual experiences of trauma by degrees. They even had 'different enemies'. Perhaps most significantly, the Polish displaced persons who arrived on the *General Langfitt* had been granted more time to adjust over a period of eight years, living in a less stressful situation than many of their fellow Poles. The time in the refugee settlements in India and Africa gave them a chance to create a strong sense of community which served them well on arrival in Australia. In time, there were many marriages which linked the two groups, but within the 'General Langfitt Group' many

of the younger people who had been to school together kept social links and friendships, while their mothers remained close friends.

The members of the 'General Langfitt Group' who participated in this project talked with great pride about the achievements of their Australian children, and immense joy about their grandchildren, justifiably believing that they are one of their major contributions to Australian society. Indeed, many of their Australia-born children appear to have absorbed the values handed down by their parents: hard work, independence, the importance of education and pride in their Polish heritage. It was partly for their children's sake that many of the participants in this project agreed to discuss their past. As Halina Juszczyk explained:

> I have often talked to my children about how we came to Australia and they often asked me to write it down. They insisted on having a written record of what I had told them many times so they would not forget. I don't want to dwell on our past, but it is important to remember. People think the world is very safe. Another Hitler or a new Stalin could emerge if people are allowed to forget about the Holocaust or the grim experiences in Russia. We must learn from history: Hitler could have been stopped but the Western powers closed their eyes. They were also very soft on the Russians. That is what I want my children to know.

Another participant had a different view on talking about the circumstances which brought her to Australia:

> I have not talked much to my son about my experiences of being forced to leave Poland. Even if we did talk about it, I couldn't tell him everything because I think his experience in life does not come near enough to it. In some ways I and a lot of my friends spoilt our children. After our experiences, when our childhood was cut short, we wanted to give everything to our children because one never knows what might happen. Not even my husband knows everything. I think it is unnecessarily burdening for them. It is past and best forgotten. There are still things that I can't talk about - they are too moving and I suppose it is the same with everybody. I still dream about it. I still dream that I am being deported, that the war is raging, that I lose everything. That is something indelible on my mind and I cannot erase it. You don't want to talk about it and you try not to think about it and remember it but, in your subconscious, it is there all the time.

Janusz Smenda was more ambivalent about the importance of recording the experiences of the 'General Langfitt Group':

> To be quite honest I don't know that it is really important. It is important in so far as it is a very minute part of Australian history and, from a sociological point of view, it is a rather unique story. Most of the migrants from the 'General Langfitt Group' have adjusted and adapted very well on the whole, without really traumatic experiences of settling in. Most of the young people entered their respective careers and studied and completed them successfully and entered different careers at various levels, or started businesses. Very few of them displayed what you might call failure, even though many came from one-parent families. Per capita there were less delinquencies, less mental or psychological problems within that group than you might expect from other migrant groups of similar size. And the mothers also adapted quite well, at various levels of their

> educational background, intellectual level. Most of them successfully managed to get their children opportunities, if not themselves, to continue to develop, which is quite remarkable.

Once knowing that they would stay in Australia and would not have to move on yet again, participants began to think of Australia as home. They still, after all these years, maintain a special and strong bond with Poland, one which many believe is founded on more than the normal bond for one's birthplace. It is a longing for something precious which is lost and cannot be replaced. For many their birthplaces which used to be in Poland have became part of Russia, and they feel that they have lost their homeland. Many no longer have family there.

Some feel that they could not, even after all this time, cope with the experience of returning to Poland. Others have made the trip, with varied reactions. Some, like Barbara Kaluzynska whose husband has family in Poland, have kept close ties with Poland and regular visits provide the opportunity to catch up with them. She talks, however, of the ambivalence of her situation:

> It was after my first visit to Poland that I first really felt that Australia was home. When I went back to Poland I loved it, I loved the people. But after two months I was ready to go home. We are an unlucky generation because we haven't got a permanent place. When we are here we long to go to Poland, when we are there we want to return to Australia. We still feel that way and I think nearly all our generation feels like that.

Regina Tabaczynska gives a different point of view:

> I went to communist Poland to visit friends and relations, some of whom I had not seen since 1937. I had a wonderful time. But I had no regrets that we had not returned to Poland. I would never have accepted communism and was happy that I escaped it. In a way I was happy when I left Poland again. I could not have lived there because the political climate was unacceptable to me. I felt oppressed. I had to look over my shoulder all the time and be careful what I said. The visit didn't bring back any memories because that part of Poland where I came from is now in Russia. I didn't belong there any longer and the strangest thing of all - I missed the English language, English newspapers and English books.

In spite of the bitter and often tragic experiences which brought the 'General Langfitt Group' to Australia and the hardships they endured in settling here, Australia has become their home. They are thankful for the opportunity Australia gave them to rebuild their lives in freedom and are rightly proud of their contribution. This story they have told for their children and grandchildren so that they will better understand the tragedy and destruction of war, the strength of the human will and the power of faith in God. Above all the memory of their beloved Poland will live on!

Appendix 1