

Publications

- *The General Langfitt Story - Polish Refugees Recount Their Experiences of Exile, Dispersal and Resettlement*

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Foreword

Australia's history has always been an interesting one. But the arrival of over 5.5 million people from so many different lands in the years since 1945 has added immeasurably to its fascination. The fascination derives in part from the past experiences of settlers, which flow on by oral and other tradition to current and succeeding generations. These earlier experiences become part of individual and collective group consciousness in a diverse and varied society.

The *General Langfitt Story* combines excellently the extraordinary background account of a group of displaced persons, mainly women and children, from Poland who arrived in Australia in 1950, and their subsequent experience in Australia.

The harshness of the life of some immigrants, such as the General Langfitt Group, before arriving in Australia, is not fully realised or adequately documented. The stories of survival of those in the group who were deported from Poland to work in remote labour camps in the Soviet Union, are nothing short of remarkable. And it is important for Australian history, and the broader record of human endeavour and endurance, that these stories be told.

Maryon Allbrook and Helen Cattalini have very sensitively collected the stories of some of those who were part of what they call the 'terrible history' of the General Langfitt Group. Their account makes riveting reading, and serves as a lasting testimony to the bravery of those who underwent these cataclysmic events.

I wish to thank the authors for their excellent work, and also very particularly those members of the General Langfitt Group who shared their story, despite the pain of recollection.

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The Authors

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Introduction

In 1950 a group of displaced persons arrived in Fremantle, Western Australia, from refugee camps in East Africa aboard a United States Army transport carrier the USAT *General W. C. Langfitt*. They became known as the 'General Langfitt Group'. A list of passengers is shown in Appendix 1.

They were a part of the 1500 000 Poles who were deported to the Soviet Union in 1940 to work in remote labour camps. Around 30 000 of them later found 'freedom' in transit camps in India, British East Africa and Palestine. Their story of hardship and survival is a dramatic and remarkable one. It is part of Australia's rich migrant settlement history and is a tribute to the strength of the people, especially the women who, together with their children, formed around eighty per cent of the 'General Langfitt Group'.

They wanted to tell their story to remind people of the destruction and futility of war, to leave a record for their children and grandchildren and to share with them a love for the Poland they knew.

A description of how this community project came about, was researched and written, is outlined in Appendix 2. The oral history method was used to collect the material from a small number of the group, whose names are listed in Appendix 3. This method resulted in many hours of taped interviews which provided a great challenge to the writers. How does one encapsulate the stories of over forty people whose recollections of this time represent the experiences of thousands of their compatriots?

Each participant had a personal tale of survival, no more nor less heroic than the others, no more nor less remarkable than the stories of those who chose to remain silent, or who were not approached to share their memories. Perception and memory have also been influenced by the passages of time, by the age of the story teller, by the process of telling and retelling the story, and by retrospective understanding of the situation. Each participant showed great courage in reliving the grief of losing loved ones through war: all lost menfolk in battle or prisoner of war camps, and siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins and friends through malnutrition, cold, disease, accident or 'broken hearts'.

On top of that, each family and each individual had different experiences of personal loss: the

deaths of siblings or other close relatives came hard on the heels of the arrest or conscription of a husband and father, and the consequent fears for the safety of menfolk caught somewhere in the war zone. In some rare instances, small families including the adult males, managed to stay together. Beyond that, the experience of war, deportation and exile exposed all victims to the fragility of life. All saw death at close hand, if not of family and friends, then of strangers, civilians and soldiers alike, along the many and various paths of their journey. It is not easy to generalise about such personally painful losses, nor to do justice to the different ways in which participants in this project have integrated these experiences into their understanding of life. Nor is it possible to do justice to the ways in which many individual story tellers allowed some of their grief to be expressed in their interviews. Many participants seemed genuinely surprised by the tears which escaped at times during the interview process. Over forty years of acceptance does not take away the pain. Nor does it stop a kaleidoscope of memories in the small hours of the morning, or the occasional nightmare.

[Chapter 1](#)