

# POLISH REFUGEES IN IRAN DURING WORLD WAR II

On September 1, 1939, German forces invaded Poland and defeated the Polish Army within weeks. Most of the westernmost Polish territory was annexed directly to the Reich; the remainder of the areas conceded to Germany by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between the Soviet Union and Germany became the so-called General Government (*Generalgouvernement*), administered by the German occupiers. In accordance with the pact's secret protocols, the Soviet Union annexed most of eastern Poland after Poland's defeat. As a result, millions of Poles fell under Soviet authority, either because they lived in areas the Soviets now occupied or because they had fled east to these areas as refugees from Nazi-occupied Poland.

During their almost two-year-long occupation, Soviet authorities deported approximately 1.25 million Poles to many parts of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> The exact number of Polish citizens deported does not exist, as a large number of those captured by the Red Army were murdered in the Katyn Forest and other locations throughout the Soviet Union. About half a million Polish civilians branded as “socially dangerous” and as “anti-Soviet elements” were forcibly removed from their homes and deported in cattle cars to labor camps in Siberia and Kazakhstan.<sup>2</sup> These civilians included civil servants, local government officials, judges, members of the police force, forest workers, settlers, small farmers, tradesmen, refugees from western Poland, children from summer camps and orphanages, family members of anyone previously arrested, and family members of anyone who escaped abroad or went missing.<sup>3</sup>

Poles deported to the Soviet Union often lived under desperate conditions. In most of the camps, all prisoners were expected to work regardless of age or physical condition. Children were in charge of transporting water, gathering firewood, and collecting food. The grueling work and harsh weather often made conditions in the camps unbearable. With little food or medical care, prisoners died every day in large numbers.<sup>4</sup>

In July 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union, forcing the Soviets to join forces with the Allies. On July 30, 1941, the exiled Polish prime minister, General Wladyslaw Sikorski, and the Soviet ambassador to the United Kingdom, Ivan Mayski, signed the Sikorski-Mayski agreement, which invalidated many of the territorial conditions of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The new agreement ordered the reestablishment of the Polish state, amnesty for Polish prisoners of war in the Soviet Union, and finally, allowed for the formation of a Polish army on Soviet soil.<sup>5</sup> Released in August 1941 from Moscow's infamous Lubyanka Prison, Polish General Wladyslaw Anders began to mobilize the Polish Armed Forces in the East (commonly known as the Anders Army) to fight against the Nazis.<sup>6</sup>

Forming the new Polish Army was not easy, however. Many Polish prisoners of war had died in the labor camps in the Soviet Union. Many of those who survived were very weak from the conditions in the camps and from malnourishment. Because the Soviets were at war with Germany, there was little food or provisions available for the Polish Army. Thus, following the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941, the Soviets agreed to evacuate part of the Polish formation to Iran. Non-military refugees, mostly women and children, were also transferred across the Caspian Sea to Iran.

During this time, Iran was suffering economically. Following the invasion, the Soviets forbade the transfer of rice to the central and southern parts of the country, causing food scarcity, famine, and rising inflation. The Allies also took control of the Trans-Iranian Railway and other modes of transportation, the manufacturing industry, and all other resources for the war effort. Despite these difficulties, Iranians openly received the Polish refugees, and the Iranian government facilitated their entry to the country and supplied them with provisions.<sup>7</sup> Polish schools, cultural and educational organizations, shops, bakeries, businesses, and press were established to make the Poles feel more at home.<sup>8</sup>

Starting in 1942, the port city of Pahlevi (now known as Anzali) became the main landing point for Polish refugees coming into Iran from the Soviet Union, receiving up to 2,500 refugees per day. General Anders evacuated 74,000 Polish troops, including approximately 41,000 civilians, many of them children, to Iran.<sup>9</sup> In total, over 116,000 refugees were relocated to Iran. Approximately 5,000–6,000 of the Polish refugees were Jewish.<sup>10</sup>

The refugees were weakened by two years of maltreatment and starvation, and many suffered from malaria, typhus, fevers, respiratory illnesses, and diseases caused by starvation.<sup>11</sup> Desperate for food after starving for so long, refugees ate as much as they could, leading to disastrous consequences. Several hundred Poles, mostly children, died shortly after arriving in Iran from acute dysentery caused by overeating. A large number of refugees lost their lives to disease and malnourishment shortly after arrival in Iran.<sup>12</sup> Most of these refugees are buried in the Armenian cemetery in Pahlevi.<sup>13</sup>

After spending several days in quarantine in warehouses near the port of Pahlevi, the refugees were sent to Tehran. There were so many refugees that government buildings and centers were allocated to house them. Army personnel were first sent to training centers near Mosul and Kirkuk in Iraq.<sup>14</sup> After training, most of the Polish soldiers joined Allied forces fighting in the Italian campaign.<sup>15</sup>

Thousands of the children who came to Iran came from orphanages in the Soviet Union, either because their parents had died or they were separated during deportations from Poland. Most of these children were eventually sent to live in orphanages in Isfahan, which had an agreeable climate and plentiful resources, allowing the children to recover from the many illnesses they contracted in the poorly managed and supplied orphanages in the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> Between 1942–45, approximately 2,000 children passed through Isfahan, so many that it was briefly called the “City of Polish Children.”<sup>17</sup> Other children were sent to orphanages in Mashad.<sup>18</sup> Numerous schools were set up to teach the children the Polish language, math, science, and other standard subjects. In some schools, Persian was also taught, along with both Polish and Iranian history and geography.

Because Iran could not permanently care for the large influx of refugees, other British-colonized countries began receiving Poles from Iran in the summer of 1942. The refugees who did not stay in Iran until the end of the war were transported to India, Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa, among other countries.<sup>19</sup> The Mexican government also agreed to take several thousand refugees.<sup>20</sup>

A number of Polish refugees stayed in Iran permanently, some eventually marrying Iranian citizens and having children. While most signs of Polish life in Iran have faded, a few have remained. Nearly 3,000 refugees died within months of arriving in Iran and were buried in cemeteries, and many of these burial sites are still well tended by Iranians today.<sup>21</sup> A Polish cemetery in Tehran is the main and largest refugee burial site in Iran, with 1,937 graves. There is a separate area in the cemetery belonging to the Jewish community of Tehran. Each of these 56 graves exhibits a Star of David and the name of the deceased in Polish.<sup>22</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Jan T. Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 146.
- <sup>2</sup> Ryzard Antolak, “Iran and the Polish Exodus from Russia 1942,” Iran Chamber Society, [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/articles/polish\\_exodus1942\\_iran.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/articles/polish_exodus1942_iran.php) (accessed March 24, 2016).
- <sup>3</sup> Gross, p. 197.
- <sup>4</sup> Parisa Damandan, *The Children of Isfahan: Polish Refugees in Iran* (Tehran: Nazarpub, 2010), p. 279.
- <sup>5</sup> Tara Zahra, *Lost Children: Displacement, Family, and Nation in Postwar Europe*, *The Journal of Modern History* 81, no. 1 (2009), p. 80.
- <sup>6</sup> Fariborz Mokhtari, *In the Lion's Shadow: The Iranian Scindler and His Homeland in the Second World War* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2012), p. 88.
- <sup>7</sup> Damandan, p. 276.
- <sup>8</sup> Sylwia Surdykowska, *In the Archive of Memory: The Fate of Poles and Iranians in the Second World War* (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2014), p. 97.
- <sup>9</sup> Zahra, p. 80.
- <sup>10</sup> Damandan, p. 276.
- <sup>11</sup> Keith Sword, *Deportation and Exile: Poles in the Soviet Union, 1939–1948*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1994), p. 70.
- <sup>12</sup> Halik Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 247.
- <sup>13</sup> Andrzej Przewoźnik, *Polskie cmentarze wojenne w Iranie* (Warsaw: Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa, 2012), p. 40.
- <sup>14</sup> Kochanski, p. 194.
- <sup>15</sup> Surdykowska, p. 21.
- <sup>16</sup> Damandan, p. 274.
- <sup>17</sup> Przewoźnik, p. 51.
- <sup>18</sup> Damandan, p. 275.
- <sup>19</sup> Kochanski, p. 252.
- <sup>20</sup> Sword, p. 84.
- <sup>21</sup> Anwar Faruqi, “Forgotten Polish Exile to Persia,” *The Washington Post*, November 23, 2000, page A45.
- <sup>22</sup> Przewoźnik, p. 27.