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## **THE EDUCATION OF POLISH CHILDREN DEPORTED TO THE USSR AND EVACUATED TO THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST DURING WORLD WAR II**

**ABSTRACT:** The text describes fragmentary education gained by children deported from the territory of Poland occupied by the Soviet Union to the forced labour camps and kolkhozes. They were subsequently evacuated from the USSR to Iran and other countries controlled by Great Britain. The release of such a large group of people from Gulag camps and places of isolation was an unprecedented situation in the Soviet system, and the presence of such a large number of civilians along the regular military units being formed at the time was unexampled in history. The authors illustrate education methods and conditions of Polish youth released with their families from Gulag camps and locations of compulsory labour together under the so-called amnesty. They provide details regarding the young refugees' health issues, numerous cases of starvation to death or symptoms of post-traumatic stress (PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder). They present the problems with the evacuation itself and confront the standards of living and expulsion from Soviet Russia with a highly positive reception of refugees on the Persian land. They indicate their further fate, including the creation of orphanages and schools, as children in the USSR were deprived of the opportunity to learn. It was important to depict extremely difficult, frequently provisional attempts at schooling Polish youngsters against the background of historic events.

**KEYWORDS:** education, deportation of children, II World War, refugees, USSR, Near and Middle East

### **Introduction**

One of the elements of the Soviet state terror system was the extermination of entire nationalities and thus referred to as enemies of the people. During the aggression against Poland on 17 September 1939, the Soviets took Polish soldiers into captivity,

of whom they executed officers in the otherwise known as Katyń crimes in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in the spring of 1940. Part of the graves of the eliminated Polish prisoners of war have not yet been found. Their families were displaced from their homes in the USSR-occupied areas to the depths of Soviet Russia, including Siberia or Kazakhstan. Among them there were youngsters, considered by the Soviets as foes. They were recurrently hurt and injured. Firstly, being victims of war, orphaned by their murdered parents, they were dying in exile due to longing and inhumane living conditions. Secondly, they became prisoners of the Soviet repression apparatus.

## **1. Polish children as victims of Soviet deportations**

After the capture of eastern Poland by the USSR, one of the common forms of repression and elimination of groups potentially dangerous to the Soviet authority, consisted in mass deportations deep into the USSR. In 1940-1941, 4 great deportations took place. In February 1940, 139-141 thousand people were exiled, mainly military and civil settlers as well as forest servants together with their family members. In June 1940, 75-80 thousand, to a large extent Jews, fell victim to deportation. Both groups were given the status of special displaced persons and were housed in the estates under the control of NKVD in the GULAG (Main Directorate of Camps). In April 1940 their relatives were granted the status of the deported for administrative reasons (Ciesielski 2010, 254).

The number of the evacuees is estimated at 320-550 thousand. Approximately 20% of the deported youngsters died of hunger, cold and diseases, which attacked weakened and malnourished organisms (Frierson | Wileński 2011, 239).

The Polish children, exiled to the USSR, stayed with their families in labour camps, kolkhozes or forest settlements, where they were forced to work as slaves. After an agreement on the release of Polish orphans from prison, they were placed in the village of Karkin-Batash (in the Uzbek language it means Death Valley) as well as other locations.

As a result of ruthless deportations of Polish people from the Eastern Borderlands by the Soviets in the years 1940-1941, nearly 380 thousand of Polish children and youth up to 18 years of age were transported to the USSR (Żaroń 1990, 233). Based on the so called “amnesty” – the consequence of the Polish-Soviet agreement (Układ Sikorski-Majski 1990, 174), multitudes of Polish exiles, released from prisons, work camps, and kolkhozes moved to the locations where the Polish Army units were organized. Children, together with their families or by themselves gathered in Kuibyshev, Buzuluk, Tockoje, Alma Ata, Tashkent, Bukhara, Kermine, Guzar, Quarshi, Ashgabad or Shahrissabz (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan). Orphanages and schools were created as means allowed. Affairs related

to Polish schools were taken care of by the branch of The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education of the Polish Government in exile (Barański 1991, 16; Protocol to the Agreement 2013, 456). Among the exiles, there were boys and girls aged 11-17 (Żaroń 1990, 233).

## **2. Education of Polish children deported deep into the USSR**

By reason of German and Russian aggression on Poland in September 1939, the Polish system of education was destroyed. The youth under German occupation were schooled within the framework of substantially reduced teaching programs. The Soviets adopted a similar approach and introduced the elements of ideological indoctrination apart from the limited teaching programs. Polish children displaced deep into the USSR owing to deportation and located in Soviet kolkhozes, sovkhozes, small settlements, or directly in gulag camps, were deprived of the opportunity to participate in any institutional education process. Along with the creation of the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR, civilian refugees came to the military camps, including school-age youngsters and young people aged between 11 and 17, for whom the army attempted to organise education. Schools for them were established in parallel with the formation of the Polish Army structures in the USSR. Those unable to attend and endangered with functional illiteracy as well as demoralization, were reaching the Polish Army until the end of June 1939 (Żaroń 1990, 233; Lasocki, 146)<sup>1</sup>. A certain number of the young Polish exiles took lessons in Russian schools (Bhattacharjee 2012, 55).

As the Polish Army (commonly referred to as Anders' Army) in the USSR was being formed, it was also ordered to establish special military schools for Polish male youth teaching general and military subjects (Szkoly Junaków/ Yunakov schools) which served to gather all them in all the units of the Polish Army in the USSR (Wawer 2012, 421). With the help of Polish Armed Forces in the USSR, at least 19 childcare and educational institutions for children and youngsters were maintained, including 8 orphanages, 3 schools for the youth, one universal school, 7 camps and training camps for male youth—and girls – Younger Volunteers. Approximately 4000 children in total were supervised there (Boćkowski 1995, 70).

One school for male youth was created in Tockoje, where a group of 120 boys aged 14-17, who arrived together with the Polish soldiers on September 2-9, 1941,

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<sup>1</sup> Life in exile in the USSR, and living conditions far below human dignity and dangerous to the biological existence of man incessantly required "special" adaptation. The survival frequently depended on committing petty crimes and stealing food. The deportees coming to the Polish Army camps posed great disciplinary problems owing to such "adaptation". The command intended to maintain discipline both among soldiers and civilians punished severely those who committed offences with the sentences including capital punishment.

to the district of Chkalovo (Orenburg in western Russia upon the River Ural) embarked on their education. However, they could not be conscripted owing to their age. The Army Reserve Centre Commander – certified colonel Janusz Gaładyk, having obtained the permission of general Władysław Anders, decided to organize a special school for them – a military one for male youth. The process began on September 13, 1941, and the first lessons were conducted on September 24, 1941 (different dates are included in the documents). It was planned to provide 5 hours of general subjects and 5 hours of military-related subjects. Field classes were reduced to the minimum due to the fact that as many as 50 schoolboys did not own shoes. In compliance with the order of the Commander of the Polish Armed Forces of October 7, 1941:

The military training that the male youth underwent was to prepare the candidates to enrol for training schools for non-commissioned officers (shorter wartime programme). Those who completed the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade had sufficient instruction for training schools for non-commissioned officers (Pilsudski Institute of London, no. 10 sign. 21/6/2h/10, 15).

The school located in Tockoje, just as other schools of this type, was not equipped in textbooks. There was no library, either. It was only possible to collect a few Russian textbooks among the local people. The male youth usually did not have shoes and were dressed in rags. Additionally, most of them did not possess underwear. The health condition of schoolboys was disastrous. 10% of them were sick every single day, mainly due to stomach problems, scurvy and flu (Pilsudski Institute of London, no. 10 sign. 21/6/2h/10, 17).

Another military school for male youth was also created in the Tatishchevo garrison upon the River Volga, as part of the 5th Infantry Division (Pilsudski Institute in London, no. 10 sign. 21/6/2h/10, 11). Ethnic minorities: 10% of the Ukrainians, 5% Belarusians and 5% Jews also went there (Pilsudski Institute in London, no. 10 sign. 21/6/2h/10, 18).

Polish Armed Forces attended to the orphanages as well. In Uzbekistan, the location assigned to the Polish Social Welfare by the Soviet authorities was deadly in terms of its climate. In April, the temperature exceeded 35 degrees centigrade and the surrounding area turned into a desert without water. The orphanage consisted of Uzbek clay houses, where all the pieces of furniture were limited to the straw on the floor, and started its activity on March 1, 1942. 200 Polish orphans aged 5 to 12 years were supervised by Krystyna Skwarko. The education, which was presumed to start on March 15, 1942, did not materialize because on March 14, 1942, the orphanage left Karkin-Batash and headed for Persia. After a two-day stop in Tehran, the group went to Isfahan (Isfahan is a city of Polish children

1989, 256-257). The name of the town contributed to the expression “the children of Isfahan”, used to describe the orphans.

The camp in Karkin-Batash was seized by a special military school for female youth (Yunachak school) after the orphans had left. From March 30, 1942, transports of girls from individual outposts of the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR began to arrive. A number of them reached their destination on their own initiative directly from kolkhozes. On May 23, 1942, there were already 691 girl soldiers in the school, and 1,036 people at the end of July. Teodora Sychowska, the school commander, divided it into the following sectors: primary, junior and secondary. Primitive living conditions, lamentable sanitation, lack of water and heat waves led to the outbreak of typhus and blood dysentery (Isfahan is a city of Polish children 1989, 257).

### **3. Evacuation of the Polish army and civilians to Persia**

The evacuation of the Polish troops formed in the USSR based on the Sikorski-Majski agreement was proposed by the Prime Minister of Great Britain Winston Churchill, who accepted the suggestion of the Commander-in-Chief General Władysław Sikorski (Pietrzak 2012, 62-63).

Being an integral part of the Polish Army, the following directions were planned for it: Arkhangelsk or Murmansk – Great Britain; Ashgabat – Iran – India with a possible branch out to Tehran and the Persian Gulf; Southern Caspian Sea ports – Basra – the Persian Gulf (Secret 1956, 476).

Initially, there was no indication that Iran would become a target of the evacuation and a centre of the Polish military exile. The country was inhabited by only 112 Polish citizens, and their fate was extremely uncertain because of a growing influence exerted by the USSR. The Germans pressed for the removal from Iran of Poles living there permanently. It was also feared that the circumstances could prevent the planned action of material aid to the Poles residing there (Pietrzak 2012, 61).

It was exceptionally challenging to evacuate the Polish troops to Iran, especially when the USSR was fighting against the Germans. Together with the army, some Polish military families had to be relocated, including women and children (General Władysław Anders 2009, 67-68). The Poles were released from the gulags situated in the Soviet Russia and places of forced settlements without any means of subsistence or any information as to where they would go further. One of the Polish officers observing the gathering of refugees was terrified. He wrote:

[...] I saw what was going on around here. I watched a wave of people abandoning a difficult but already occupied place of residence or exile, concentrated around an army that was undernourished and consumed by epidemics (Applebaum 2005, 417).

According to a report prepared by the British Colonel Alexander Ross (a representative of MERRA – the Middle East Relief and Refugee Administration), 116,131 Poles reached Iran, among them about 20,000 children (Fiedler 2019, 36). Wiktor Styburski, a delegate of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, noted that the majority of the evacuees were military settlers from the former eastern provinces of Poland with families and officers' wives, non-commissioned officers and privates with children (Pietrzak 2012, 70). The Soviets treated Polish citizens from the national minorities as Soviet citizens and agreed to relocate only the soldiers' immediate families, orphans and social activists. They were particularly strict in demanding that Jewish citizens remain in the USSR. Despite the Soviet resistance, General Władysław Anders managed to evacuate the closest families of Jewish soldiers, orphaned children, political and social activists and rabbis. Whereas General Władysław Sikorski, the Prime Minister of the Polish government in exile, instructed General Władysław Anders that provoking the Soviets to also include the Jews might cause the process to stop (Pietrzak 2012, 82).

During the evacuation to Iran, the residents of one of the orphanages were detained in the Base for a few days longer since the children were in an extremely poor condition, hence not strong enough to travel. Dressed in rags, with dark circles around their eyes, they resembled skeletons. In addition, they were inhumanely burdened with luggage. In some orphanages, youngsters were robbed and beaten by their guardians. When asked by the Base Command why the subjects were in such a weak state, the latter explained that they ran too much, bathed too often and stayed in a harmful climate. The Commander of the Evacuation Base arrested the perpetrators for child abuse and the investigation into the case was performed (Berling 1990, 292).

During the evacuation, a decrease in the moral state of the civilian population in the army could be observed. Extreme situations occurred. Mothers left their sick offspring, adult children abandoned their parents without care and any information whatsoever. Natural human reflexes were being sidelined. The major issue was to flee at all costs (Piłsudski Institute in London 1942, no. 21. sign. 21/6/24/8. File no. 8, 102). The low level of ethics and morality of the evacuees was also noticeable. Everybody was desperate to escape. Even family ties did not matter any longer. There was a madness of joy and the desire to survive. Thieves prowled around in large numbers, usually stealing objects of little value. Complaints concerning thefts proved unsuccessful because neither the criminals nor the victims stayed on in one place for too long (Berling 1990, 288, 289).

Numerous people not entitled to leave the territory of the USSR together with the Polish Army made efforts to be reported by military persons or their families as their closest relatives, thus obtaining the right to depart (Piłsudski Institute... 1942, no. 3 21/6/2h/3, 6). General Władysław Anders stated that the evacuation transports were regular, taking place every minute. Those who missed them stayed in the

USSR. There was no waiting for any decision on the part of the British authorities as to who could and could not be accepted in Iran. General Anders emphasized that he was either saving civilians or not. If some of the evacuees in Iran were to die, then everyone in the USSR was bound to die. He took full responsibility for the evacuation of non-military persons and did not revoke any directions or orders given. General Anders had a tendency to ignore regulations and orders that he considered wrong. The relocation of the Polish army and refugees to Iran proceeded swiftly, which indicated the enormous capabilities and efficiency of the Soviets when they operated under the supervision of the NKVD (Siemaszko 2012, 420-421).

After the first evacuation of the Polish Army to the Middle East, 40,508 soldiers still remained in the USSR (Wawer 2012, 242). During its second part, which took place from 7 to 25 August 1942, the rest of the organizational units of the Polish Army in the USSR were moved to the Middle East, including the military schools for male and female youth (Szkóły Junaków i Junaczek) and orphanages with teaching and educational staff. Thus, 69,247 people arrived in the Middle East, among others 2,430 officers, 36,701 non-commissioned officers and privates, 112 military officials, 2,738 youth enrolled for special military schools for male and female youth, 25,501 civilians, as well as 9,633 children (Żaroń 1996, 142).

Some of the Polish refugee youngsters travelled a dangerous land-mountain road through Meshed. A small percentage of them arrived from Russia by land. The transport conditions were in a lamentable state. They were deprived of food and medical care. The exiled were decimated by typhus. Those from the orphanages and children shelters were evacuated through Iraq and Syria to Palestine. They were sent to different parts of the British Empire, South Africa, India, West Africa and even Mexico (Digital Library, Ośrodek Karta, AW I/0628AB).

#### **4. Polish orphans in Iran**

Upon arrival on the Iranian shore in Pahlavi, people were gradually transported by trucks to Tehran. The first one reached its destination on March 28, and the last one left Pahlavi on April 23, 1942. From March 27 to April 8, 1942, 3,803 children left the Evacuation Base in Pahlavi. Their end points were Tehran and Hamadan. The key role in the evacuation was played by a British team of the so-called Polish Evacuation Staff led by Colonel Alexander Ross (Pietrzak 2012, 69; Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum).

In Tehran, one civilian camp for Polish refugees was situated in a sandy area and another one in a green garden. The Polish children did not leave the former one for Africa until 1945 by sea to the port of Dar es Salaam, and then in 1948 they returned to Genoa in Europe (Digital Library Centrum Karta, AW I/0435) via many places in Africa. Refugees from the camp located in the park among



the groves of grenade trees were taken to New Zealand (Digital Library Centrum Karta. The account of Emilia Hołowina).

Under an agreement between the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in exile and the British authorities, Polish children were also sent to Isfahan, the healthiest city in Iran. On April 10, 1942, 250 of them arrived in Isfahan (Śledziński 2017, 219). According to them it was a city of colours and sounds, full of greenery and had good climatic conditions. One of the orphanages was placed in the monastery of the Salesian Friars, where favourable conditions were provided. Each child had a bed with clean bedsheets and a bedside cabinet. The very same buildings housed huge classrooms. The meals were tasty, the children did not lack fruit, and thus vitamins. However, fears of hunger, dating back to the time of their stay in Russia, still persisted. They would grab bread from the dining room and hide it under a pillow. Such habits only disappeared with the passage of time. Approximately 2,900 died in Iran. Hunger also took its toll. There was no shortage of food in Iran and there was a lot to choose from, but it was too late to save many lives. The body did not accept nourishment, even though it was capable of digestion. The mental blockade activated did not allow for food consumption. That psychological paralysis was caused by traumatic experiences in the USSR, loss of family, siblings and impossible for doctors to overcome (Śledziński 2017, 220-221). In this case the reference is to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The syndrome was caused by separation from parents, and their death in front of their children's eyes, by physical and mental violence, hopelessness, prolonged stress as well as lack of support (Krüger 2009, 17). The consequence of traumatic situations was powerlessness and numbness, lack of biologically conditioned flight or fight (Krüger 2009, 21; Osza 2003, 10-12) reactions. All the above mentioned traumatic conditions described by doctors as *marasmus* usually lead to the child not absorbing food and, consequently, to starvation (Krüger 2009, 43).

## 5. India in assisting Polish refugees

There was a problem related to continuing to care for children deported from the USSR. The first country that came to help the Polish refugees was India. The first group to depart from Soviet Russia for India left for Ashgabad in trucks in mid-March 1942, namely on 19 March 1942. The vehicles entered Persia in Meshad, where the children were quarantined for a few weeks so as to avoid an epidemic. The British colonial authorities were initially reluctant to accept a larger group of Poles. It was not until January 1942 that they agreed to receive 500 of them, and in June 1942 another 500. Nevertheless, the situation developed quite differently. As late as the end of 1941, the Polish Red Cross, with the aid of the Indian Red Cross, sent 11 lorries to the USSR with various items necessary for



Poles in extremely difficult conditions. Shocked by the sight of the Polish orphans, the representatives of the Indian Red Cross prompted the authorities of the Soviet Samarkand to agree to take 161 children with 10 guardians with them to India. Then, 220 of them left with 17 carers and the third transport transpired in July 1942. Altogether, there were 720 Polish children with carers in India. In 1943, as many as 2,600 of them aged between 3 and 16 in India. In 1945, Polish settlements in India numbered 10,000 people. The ruler of the Naganawar Principality (today's part of the state of Gujarat) Maharaja Jam Sahib Digvijaysinhji Ranjitsinhji, who had met Ignacy Paderewski in Switzerland before the war, was interested in Poland and, as one of two Indian delegates in the war cabinet of Great Britain, encountered General Władysław Sikorski. The Maharaja was the first to express his willingness to accept 500 and later 1000 children. He donated part of his seaside estate in the Balachadi area near Jamnagar for this purpose. The camp existed from July 16, 1942 to November 1, 1946 under the management of the Delegation of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare of the Government of the Republic of Poland in Exile in London. It contained a hospital and, among others, children with tuberculosis contracted in Soviet Russia, were treated there (Kałuski 2016, 48).

The remaining orphans were transported to Balachadi and other camps before reaching transitional camps in Hyderabad and Mumbai. The largest one for Polish orphans was established in Kolpahur, Maharashtra (450 km from Mumbai). The Polish Consul in Mumbai Eugeniusz Banasiński and his wife Kira Banasińska as well as the Vice-Consul Tadeusz Lisiecki, contributed greatly to the reception of Polish children in India (Kałuski 2016, 49-50).

Of all the Polish inhabitants of the camp in Valivade, only 473 decided, for family reasons, to return to Poland enslaved by the communists. The communist authorities were inclined to resettle the children from the centre in Balachadi to Poland by force. The commandant of the Polish orphanage and the Maharaja Sahib Digvijaysinhji Ranjitsinhji and his adjutant came to their defence and in front of the local court they jointly adopted several hundred Polish orphans, for which they were accused by the collaborating communist authorities of "international kidnapping" (Kałuski 2016, 53).

## **Conclusions**

The article indirectly describes the fate of 18 thousand children evacuated together with the Polish Army from the USSR in 1942, and thus saved. More than 120,000 Poles, among them 43,000 civilians, also the youngest ones, stayed in the camps for the soldiers and their families set up in Iran. In February and March 1943, the last and little-known, evacuation of the sick and orphans, including Jewish orphans took place.

The fate of Polish children, mainly orphans and half-orphans transported abroad in the years 1942-1947 proved to be particularly tragic. They became victims not only of political and armed turmoil but were also deprived of proper care and childhood. Those were primary factors which prevented planning and organizing education. Moreover, the revealed historical truth is a kind of dedication to those who, in various ways, preserve the lives and dignity of adolescents during such turbulent times. They were sent from Iran to New Zealand, Lebanon and India. After the war, some of them managed to return to Poland.

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