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## The Historical Narration of Polish Refugees in British India

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to analyze the history of Polish refugees who came after the second world war in different areas between 1942-1946 especially resided in the temporary camps on the territory of today's Pakistan i.e., Karachi and Quetta. It focuses on the main three camps including Quetta Camp, the Country Club Camp in Karachi and the Malir Camp. The Polish refugees who left the USSR during the second world war were called by many an "inhuman land". Nearly 325,000 Poles migrated at the beginning and went to different parts of the world.*

*The very first Polish refugee camp was established in Iran but due to overpopulation, and because of the country's political situation, it had to relocate them to other areas. Through, Iran, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, they came to Karachi Port and Quetta too and between 1942 to 1946.*

**Keywords:** Refugees, Polish, Camps, Karachi, Quetta, Valivade-Kolhapur, Balachadi, World War II, History

### Introduction

The history of Polish refugees who left the USSR, called by many an "inhuman land",<sup>1</sup> is an important part of the fortune of the Polish diaspora. Nearly 325,000<sup>2</sup> Poles at the beginning of 40' – against their will – were deported from Eastern Borderlands (contemporary Poland, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus) deep into Soviet Russia, primarily to Siberia. These mass deportations, between 1940 and 1941, were the largest in Polish history.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Prokopiak, "Podróż mimo woli", [Journey against the Will] in *Historia i Świat*, No. 4 (2015): 456.

<sup>2</sup> J. Wróbel, *Uchodźcy Polscy ze Związku Sowieckiego 1942-1950* (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2003), 12.

After their arrival in the Soviet Union, women, children, and elders became prisoners in the labour camps, whereas men were forcefully conscripted into the Red Army. It is estimated that the number of Polish captives was around 100,000, while, at the same time, 230,000 Poles performed military service in the Soviet Army. According to an occupant, they were to stay there for the rest of their lives. The living conditions in the labour camps in Soviet Russia were an affront to humanity, which in the long run threatened the physical extermination of the exiles.

The situation of Poles drastically changed at the beginning of the summer of 1941 when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The event not only changed the course of the War but also thousands of Polish exiles. On July 30 1941, the Sikorski-Majski Agreement was signed between exiled Polish PM Sikorski and the Soviet ambassador to the UK, Majski in Britain. The pact supported the restoration of the Polish state. It also provided an 'amnesty' for Poles in Soviet prisons and labour camps.<sup>3</sup> Tens of thousands of Polish exiles went to the southern USSR, where the Polish Army was being raised. Those who were unable to fight on the front i.e., women, children, and the elderly were sent to the refugee camps located in Asia, Africa, and South America. Interestingly, massive work for the establishment of the Polish Army took place in British India. General Anders' Army was to receive equipment from the warehouses of the British Empire stationed on the territory of British India.<sup>4</sup> This fact made the Consulate of Poland in Mumbai an extremely important centre for the management of this activity.<sup>5</sup> The consulate, founded on January 1, 1933, was headed by doctor Eugeniusz Banasiński. Mr. Bansiński was born in Kielce (Poland) in 1887. He completed his studies in Fribourg (Switzerland). As a diplomat, he worked in Japan and Russia. Together with his wife – Kira Basińska, who was the head of the Polish Red Cross in India, they organized and coordinated help for the Polish refugees in British India. The Polish Red Cross in British India played a significant role in taking care of the Polish refugees. The organization dealt with many issues related to the material assistance to the refugees,

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<sup>3</sup> Visit [encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/polish-refugees-in-iran-during-world-war-ii](https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/polish-refugees-in-iran-during-world-war-ii).

<sup>4</sup> K. Seroka, "Polak w Indiach (1943-1948). Organ Delegatury Ministerstwa i Opieki Społecznej w Bombaju, Polska 1944/45-1989", *Studia i Materiały*, No. 19 (2021): 7.

<sup>5</sup> See details J. Tupińska, "Z historii stosunków polsko-indyjskich", *Azja-Pacyfik*, No. 11 (2008): 124.

organization of their functioning in temporary and permanent camps as well as tracing lost folk.<sup>6</sup>

The evacuation of Poles from the USSR was the largest operation of its kind carried out during the Second World War. Despite many obstacles, it was possible to relocate thousands of people to countries far from the main war theatre.

In the beginning, the first refugee camps for Poles were established in Iran. Due to overpopulation and the general political situation, it was decided to relocate them elsewhere. The vast majority of Poles in British India were orphans. It is worth emphasizing that in 1941 Joseph Stalin agreed to allow 75,000<sup>7</sup> Polish orphans to leave the USSR. The Polish Army decided to take care of them. Groups of Polish refugees reached British India in the Spring of 1942, some by land - through Turkmenistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, while others by sea to the port of Karachi. On the territory of present-day Pakistan and India, between 1942 and 1948, three types of refugee camps functioned:

1. Temporary camps e.g., Quetta, Malir (British India, now in Pakistan) and Bandra, India.
2. Transit camps e.g., the Country Club Camp in Karachi, (now in Pakistan).
3. Permanent settlements e.g., Valivade-Kolhapur, Balachadi, India.

### **The Polish refugee camps**

#### **Quetta**

Quetta was the first city where Polish refugees reached as orphans on April 9, 1942. The first group consisted of 94 children, 4 babysitters, and Father Franciszek Pluta.<sup>8</sup> The journey of the orphans and their guardians was organized by Kira Banasińska – wife of Polish Counsel in Mumbai. The route of the Poles' journey to British India was dangerous, several thousand kilometres long, full of mountain ranges and deserts. At the turn of 1941 and 1942, this road was paved by rescue expeditions of the Polish Red Cross, which brought medicines and food from British India for Poles staying in the

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<sup>6</sup> E. Maresch, "Bombaj: Centrala Polskich Placówek", in *Polacy w Indiach 1942-1948 w świetle dokumentów i wspomnień*, L. Beldowski, eds. (London: 2000), 55-56.

<sup>7</sup> A. Bhattacharjee, *Druza ojczyzna. Polskie dzieci tułaczce w Indiach* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2014), 49.

<sup>8</sup> A. Bhattacharjee, *The Second Home: Polish Refugees in India* (Sage Publication, 2012).

southern regions of the USSR.<sup>9</sup> Quetta, located at the Indian-Iranian borderland, played a significant role. There was a British military garrison that had access to the airport. Some of the Polish orphans stayed in Quetta, whereas others went to Bandra, Bombay. Children in Quetta were accommodated in brick-built blocks formed in segments. In the living compartments were neatly arranged beds covered with military blankets. Each bed was equipped with a mosquito net. In the aisles between the beds, there were small cabinets, each with a small package of sweets. Wiesław Stypuła, who at the age of 7 went to Quetta together with other orphans transported from the USSR via Iran in the publication titled, *As a guest at the Polish maharaja. Memories of a stay in the Polish Children's Settlement in India in the years 1942-1946*, described Quetta as "wonderful".<sup>10</sup> Each child from the military warehouse received trousers, shorts, a vest, a T-shirt, sandals, a handkerchief, a towel, soap, a toothbrush, and a cork helmet. For the first time since the labour camp in Siberia, they owned something.

The biggest problem faced by the Polish orphans after arriving in the refugee camps was their health. The stay in inhumane conditions in Soviet Russia dangerously affected their health. Indian doctors dealing with orphans found young children afflicted with malnutrition, avitaminosis, optical disease, pneumonia, dermatopathy etc. Intensive medical treatment, good nutrition, and active rest quickly led to an improvement in their health. It was followed by good education.<sup>11</sup> As Wiesław Stypuła recalls, "After a few days we settled in the new environment for good, a lot of exercise, rational nutrition and many attractions made us feel great both physically and mentally".<sup>12</sup>

In September 1942, the children from Quetta were transferred to Polish Children Camp "Balachadi-Jamnager". They stayed there until the end of the Second World War.

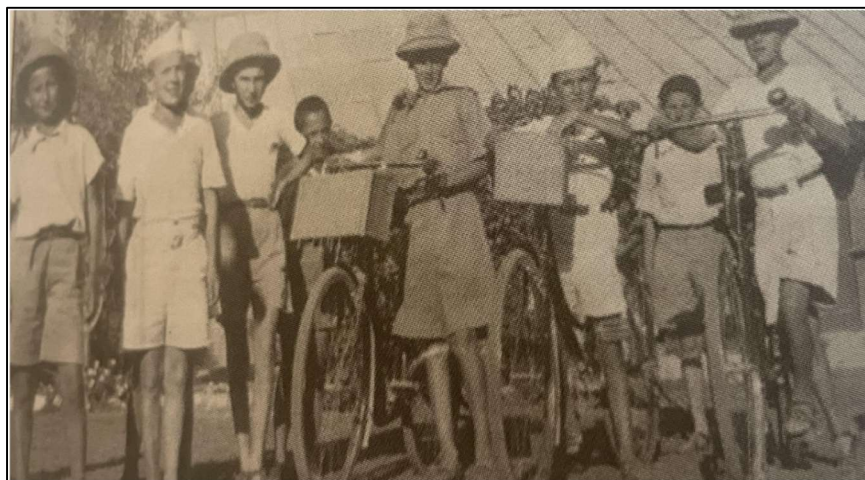
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<sup>9</sup> K. Seroka, *Polak w Indiach*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> W. Stypuła, *W gościnie u polskiego maharadży (wspomnienia z pobytu w Osiedlu Dzieci Polskich w Indiach w latach: 1942-1946)* (Grajewo: Wydawnictwo Eko-Dom, 2011), 46-52.

<sup>11</sup> Tomasz Gerlach, "Sto lat poza ojczyzną" (One hundred years away from Motherland), *Rzeczpospolita*, supplement, "Plus-Minus", 30, Issue. 396 (2000).

<sup>12</sup> W. Stypuła, *W gościnie u polskiego maharadży*, 48.



**Polish orphans in Quetta. Wiesław Stypuła – first on the left.**

Source: W. Stypuła, *W gościnie u polskiego maharadży (wspomnienia z pobytu w Osiedlu Dzieci, Polskich w Indiach w latach 1942-1946)*, 50.

### **Karachi**

In August 1942, another group of Polish refugees reached British India (today Pakistan). Contrary to the previous description, around 1,505 people (transports No. 3 and No. 4) travelled by sea from Khorramshahr to Karachi. Polish establishments in Karachi at that time were not financially and organizationally prepared to take proper care of the refugees, so the responsibility for the newcomers initially fell entirely on the British authorities. After the ships with refugees arrived at the port, the local Karachi Evacuee Committee, headed by the wife of the local governor, provided Poles with thousands of cookies and cold drinks. During direct contact with the refugees, it turned out that what they needed the most was medical care. The committee cooperating with the local community immediately organized the most needed help. Among those who arrived in Karachi was Halina Witkowska (née Wojtkowska), who survived bad conditions in the Siberian camps, and together with her mother Jadwiga Witkowska with younger brother Julian Witkowski, ended up in a transit camp in Malir.<sup>13</sup>

After arriving in Karachi, the Polish refugees were temporarily housed in Haji Pilgrim Camp, located in the bazaar district of Karachi. Before the outbreak

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<sup>13</sup> S. Prokopiak, *Podróż mimo woli*, 449-473.

of the Second World War, the Haji Pilgrim Camp used to serve as a pilgrim's training camp going to Mecca. The war stopped the movement of pilgrims, so it was converted into a refugee camp, consisting of several barracks and tents, which together could accommodate several hundred people. It was equipped with all the medical and hygiene facilities which was an added value. The personnel of the camp were the English Commandant's Office with Major Reeves in the lead.<sup>14</sup> He had several adjutants and six non-commissioned officers at his disposal. The British military authorities decided to send to the Haji Pilgrim Camp an additional doctor, feldsher, and four medical assistants. It was necessary due to the weak health condition of the refugees. Poles who were stationed in Karachi with American troops were used as translators. The organization of life in the Haji Pilgrims Camp was facilitated by the fact that the transports already had their commanders appointed in Iran.<sup>15</sup> The biggest issue faced by Poles in the first days of their stay in the Haji Pilgrim Camp was food rations. According to the refugees, they were insufficient, which aroused conflicts with Major Reeves. An additional problem was overpopulation, caused by difficulties in relocating Poles to Africa. Bearing in mind the problems that arose, it was decided to organize a new, larger transit camp.

### **The Country Club Camp**

A new camp called "The Country Club Camp" or "The Camp of Polish Evacuated" was opened on September 4, 1942. Between September 1942 and December 1944, more than 20,000 Poles passed the Country Club Camp. On average, 2,000 people stayed in the asylum, while the permanent service catered for about 200 people.

The Country Club Camp was located in a desert area belonging to British Military Base, about 20 km from Karachi. The camp was under British military administration. The Polish authorities were only responsible for culture and education. The camp was temporary and its purpose was to prepare groups of refugees for further relocation to different areas of British India as well as Africa, South America, and New Zealand.

The first group of Poles arrived at The Country Club Camp in September 1942. Some of them came from Iran, whereas the others were relocated from the overpopulated Haji Pilgrim Camp.

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<sup>14</sup> J. Wróbel, *Uchodźcy Polscy ze Związku Sowieckiego*, 100.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Due to the growing number of Poles heading towards British India, it was decided to establish "The Delegacy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare". Delegacies of this type had already functioned in Europe in places such as France, Spain, Portugal, and in the Middle East - in Palestine and Iran. The Delegacy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare in Mumbai was officially established on May 29, 1943. Kiara Banasińska became the head of this institution. In general, delegacies operating in different parts of the world were responsible for supervising all organizations helping refugees and for paying benefits to civilians.<sup>16</sup> The primary focus of the Mumbai delegacy was to provide lasting care for refugees by setting up camps for them and negotiating with the Brits about the number of refugees.<sup>17</sup> The Delegacy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare in Mumbai took care of 5 refugee centres - Karachi, Malir, Valivade, Balachadi, and Panchagni. It also created a framework for the functioning of the camps, including regulations, rights and obligations of refugees and basic living conditions in British India.<sup>18</sup>

As mentioned before, in the Autumn of 1942 mass transports of Poles began to arrive at the Country Club Camp. The refugees were to stay in Karachi only for a couple of days. However, due to weather conditions on the Indian Ocean and other difficulties connected with inefficient transport, the stay in the Country Club Camp was significantly extended. Besides, modest housing conditions (most of the refugees lived in military tents in difficult climate conditions) due to bad and insufficient supply of food created management issues in the camp. The Poles accused the British command of insufficient food rations and blamed them for treating them as prisoners of war. The dispute was so serious that Kira Banasińska had to intervene. She managed to convince the British command to increase the food rations for refugees, bearing in mind their exhaustion after their stay in Siberia. A suicide attempt by one of the Polish protesters led to the dismissal of Major Reeves and all his staff. His place was taken by Capt. A.S. Allan was aware of the problems of refugees thanks to previous cooperation with Kira Banasińska. Allan was highly regarded by the refugees. They appreciated his commitment, openness, and energy. He performed his duties with great dedication. He even learned Polish enough to communicate freely with Poles.

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<sup>16</sup> K. Śliwak, *Delegatura Ministerstwa Pracy i Opieki Społecznej w Teheranie w latach II wojny światowej – charakterystyka działań edukacyjnych dla polskich uchodźców*, "Ogrody Nauki i Sztuki", 2015, No. 5, p. 261-262.

<sup>17</sup> E. Maresch, Bombaj. Centrala polskich placówek, 44.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

When the administration handled the situation well the Delegacy in Mumbai started to organize education for children and teenagers. Even though there were not enough qualified teachers and Polish textbooks, it was possible to organize 4 classes. Qualification for classes depended not on age but on the level of understanding, primarily reading and writing skills. Class 1 had the greatest number of students. It consisted of 183 children between the ages of 7 and 10. Class 2 consisted of 105 children between the ages of 8 and 10. Class 3 consisted of 118 children between the ages of 9 and 13. Class 4 consisted of 114 children between the ages of 10 to 14. The school program for classes 1 and 2 included learning and writing in Polish, easy poems, geography, and history in the form of fairy tales, elementary arithmetic, prayers, and educational conversation. Children and teenagers from classes 3 and 4 had a more advanced program. Jan Moldzyński was responsible for English lessons for willing children. Only 16 teachers were teaching in the camp school. The Polish school in the Country Club Camp functioned for three years. The number of children participating in school education in the particular periods ranged from 200 to 750. Besides the school in the Country Club Camp, there was also a kindergarten for children aged from 3 to 7.

The progressive adaptation of Polish refugees to the new conditions contributed to professional activities also. Poles began to work, mainly in workshops, near American and British military units. On March 17, 1944, the Polish refugees established the cooperative called "Społem". The principal objective of the cooperative was to prepare Poles to return to their homeland after the end of the Second World War. They learned new, practical skills and started to develop personal competencies. Within the cooperative "Społem", there were tailoring workshops for men and women and workshops for the production of artistic products. Profits from these workshops were channelled in the allocation of large sums for orphan scholarships, the purchase of sewing machines, and salary rise.<sup>19</sup>

The Country Club Camp till its closure was commanded by Brits – under the guidance of Captain A.S. Allan. Capt. He was supported by the British military and Poles recruited among the refugees. The Polish authorities were represented by vice-Consul Józef Gruja and the head of the Delegacy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare in Mumbai Kira Bansińska. The Brits were responsible for general administration, sanitation, hygiene food,

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<sup>19</sup> J. Zalewski, *Spółdzielnia "Społem" w obozie tranzytowym w Karaczi, "Polak w Indiach"*, 1945.



security maintenance and conditions of buildings, and the post office, whereas Poles were engaged in education, culture, clothing supplies, and communications between camps.

Despite the favour of the British Indian authorities for the cause of Polish refugees, the lack of permanent settlements remained a problem. The incoming transports of refugees from Iran caused a constant overload in the temporary camps. To avoid a recurrence of protests or mayhem from the Country Club Camp, the Polish Delegation from Mumbai reached an agreement with the American Command to lease a military camp.<sup>20</sup> In September 1943, the vast majority of children from the Country Club Camp were relocated to Mexico (about 500) and to Valivade (India).<sup>21</sup>



**Polish children in the Country Club Camp in Karachi, 1945.**

Source: <https://foto.karta.org.pl/wyszukiwarka/>

### **Malir Camp**

The new temporary camp was in Malir, located now in Pakistan less than 25 km from Karachi. Negotiations regarding Malir were conducted by Kira Banasińska and General Brady. They agreed to lease the camp to the Polish refugees.<sup>22</sup> It is worth mentioning that the fund for necessary adaptation works in Malir was provided by the Indian government. Beyond financial

<sup>20</sup> J. Wróbel, *Uchodźcy Polscy ze Związku Sowieckiego*, 104.

<sup>21</sup> Zalewski, *Polak w Indiach*, 3 - 12.

<sup>22</sup> E. Maresch, *Bombaj: Centrala Polskich Placówek*, 89.

assistance, the government provided the Polish Consulate with advice and guidance. For instance, they assisted in establishing contact with the companies that were able to carry out the necessary work in Malir Camp.

The Malir Camp compared to the Country Club Camp was better adapted to the needs of refugees. It had good infrastructure, which consisted of new, large buildings with cement floors, and sanitary, and kitchen facilities. Most importantly, it had plenty of water. The camp could host up to 2,200 people, but the plans were to accommodate up to 5,000 refugees there.<sup>23</sup> The majority of Malir Camp residents were women and children. One of them was Halina Wojtkowska who lived there with her mother and younger brother. From her memories, we learn that "the warmth they dreamed about while being in Siberia was almost unbearable in Malir".<sup>24</sup>

After moving an orphanage from the Country Club Camp to Malir, it was decided to open in Malir Camp a primary school and a junior high school. On average, about 300 children enrolled in both institutions with only 4 qualified teachers.

Temporary and permanent camps became specific Polish enclaves where, despite difficult conditions, the refugees tried to develop cultural and sports life, which was a substitute for their homeland. Amateur theatres, dance groups, and sports teams functioned in the Country Club and Malir camps. Of particular interest, not only among Poles but also Brits, Americans, Pakistanis and Indians, was the activity of an amateur theatre, which staged numerous performances for children.

In both camps, strict antimalarial regulations were applied. This reduced the incidence of a disease that Poles had not encountered before. First of all, the refugees were equipped with mosquito nets and mosquito repellent creams. The authorities implemented a ban on storing food in tents and barracks and drinking water from unknown sources. In both camps, there was a well-stocked hospital and medical unit, which helped those in need. Extreme medical cases were treated in British military hospitals.

After the agreement on the lease of the camp in Malir from the Americans

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<sup>23</sup> K. Seroka, *Polak w Indiach (1943-1948)*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> S. Prokopiak, *Podróż mimo woli*, 466.

expired, its inhabitants were resettled to the permanent camp in Valivade at the end of 1943.

The refugees from the camps in Karachi and Malir saw the end of the Second World War in the permanent camps not only in the area of British India, but also in Africa, South America, and New Zealand. They did not expect that the end of the war would not be the end of their itinerancy.

### **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, the story of Polish refugees from Soviet Russia does not have a happy ending. The agreements adopted in Yalta by the victorious powers - the USA, the USSR, and Great Britain - deprived refugees of the right to return to their homes in the Eastern Borderlands. The majority of those who lived in refugee camps around the world stayed abroad primarily in the USA, Canada, and West Europe. Smaller groups decided to resettle in Argentina, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand. Despite living outside their homeland, they cultivated Polish traditions, waiting for the opportunity to return. Former residents of refugee camps undertook several socio-cultural initiatives. For instance, in Great Britain, a 'Society of Poles in India' was established in 1947. It connects with the alumni of the permanent camp in Valivade and their descendants who are trying to save from oblivion the history of Polish orphans who once lived in British India.