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Since 1618

**HAMMERSMITH  
UNITED  
CHARITIES**

# Passport to Exile

## The Polish Way to London

Ethnic Communities Oral History Project

Supporting the community since 1618

*“If English is not your first and most fluent language, how do you share your life experiences with others, not familiar with yours... ‘ordinary people’s life histories deserve as wide a readership as possible.’”*

**Sav Kyriacou**

Former project coordinator  
The Ethnic Communities Oral History Project

## Introduction

In the late 80s/early 90s, the Hammersmith and Fulham Ethnic Communities Oral History Project published a set of 12 memoirs chronicling the collective experiences of the communities that make up our very diverse borough through the specific stories of individual members of them.

*“After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.”*

Philip Pullman

Nearly a quarter of a century later, as part of our marking 400 years of bringing this community together, Hammersmith United Charities is republishing these stories. We will publish one a month, each launched at a special lunch held in a venue which also reflects the community in question. We can think of no better way of celebrating the depth and richness of the heritage of our Area of Benefit nor of showcasing the range of talents and experiences from which it benefits than through the republication of these stories.

*“He who is different from me ....enriches me. Our unity is constituted in something higher than ourselves - in Man... For no man seeks to hear his own echo, or to find his reflection in the glass.”*

(Antoine de Saint-Exupéry)

This is the full list of publications, we hope you enjoy them as much as we have.

1. The Irish in Exile - Stories of Emigration
2. Passport to Exile - The Polish Way to London
3. In Exile - Iranian Recollections
4. The Motherland Calls - African-Caribbean Experiences
5. The Forgotten Lives - Gypsies and Travellers on the Westway Site
6. Xenia - Greek-Cypriots in London
7. Ship of Hope - The Basque Children
8. Aunt Esther’s Story (with Stephen Bourne)
9. Somali Sailors
10. Asian Voices - Life Stories from the Indian Sub-continent
11. Sailing on Two Boats - Second Generation Perspectives
12. Such a Long Story! - Chinese Voices in Britain

# Passport to Exile

## *The Polish Way to London*

You may wonder why there are so many Poles in London. Most of us came with the army to fight alongside British forces for freedom, as it says on many Polish war memorials “For our freedom and yours.”

The stories in this book show some of the many different routes taken by Poles on their way to London, some through battlefields, some through prison camps and others with less dramatic but still traumatic experiences. The five stories in this book do not attempt to be representative, we hope instead that they individualise and escape from certain well established stereotypes and are grateful for the chance to tell our own stories in our own words.

*Polish Reminiscence Group*

# JERZY

Jerzy joined the Polish Air Force at the age of 16 in 1937. He left Poland to join the French Air Force via Romania. After a bitter campaign he came to England in 1940 and joined the RAF in Gloucester. In 1948 he came to London and settled in West Kensington.

The very first thing that I remember is that we lived in a big house which we shared with three other families. There was my mother and I had a brother and a sister. The life wasn't easy because we lost our father who was wounded in the First World War and my mother was a widow just trying to make a living out of her pension. But we all helped as much as we could because that was one of the things that was expected of us.

I went to a school, fairly modern, there was over 500 children. It was very strict, the teachers insisted on nothing but the best, all the pupils had to produce first class work every day through the year, nothing below that would satisfy them. That was a primary school, the secondary school was even stricter because parents had to pay a fee. Therefore we had to work as hard as we could because the top few pupils didn't have to pay a fee, so that was the reason why I myself had to produce the best work to be exempt from payment as my mother would not be able to pay herself. I managed somehow, it was through hard work and dedication and I had to deprive myself from spare time because I committed myself to be one of the first three. I took maths, physics and later on chemistry but I wasn't very good at chemistry and that I had to drop. History was one of my difficult subjects but geography I liked very much.

We didn't bother about games, it was athletics mostly because we had such a lot of heroes amongst our athletes and we wanted to emulate them, especially runners, middle distance runners and sprinters. So every boy more or less tried to run if not everyday every other day just to compete against the other boys. Once we had a film, that was the very first time in my life I've seen a film in slow motion and that was of the English runner, which I never forgot his name, that was Wooderson, he was running 400 metres and that stuck in my mind. Up to now I can see him running and we all tried to copy him because he was so successful even if he never won the Olympic medal. Besides him we had Polish runners, Kusocinski who was a very well built man but he was marvellous for middle distance. There were others like Noi, the long distance runner. The biggest treat for us was to go to Warsaw to watch the athletics meetings.

There was one which I attended as a twelve year old and that was athletic meeting between Belgium and Hungary, what a thrill that was! I was quite good at running but the thing was I could not make my mind up what would suit me better, running or long jump. Running was easier because you could run everywhere where long jump you had to have a special place.

As soon as I reached the age of 16 I wanted to join the Air Force and I was successful at the first attempt. That was my dream to become an airman no matter whether I would be among the ground staff or a flying personnel. When I joined the Air Force we had the same programme for the first year and after that I went to be trained as a fitter where others went to be trained as pilots or navigators. I enjoyed being a fitter, it gave me terrific satisfaction that I could do all necessary work on the aircraft and keep it flying, that was the object, keep them flying and repair them if something went wrong.

Well when the war broke out I was in a squadron where we took active part in fighting even when we kept losing aircraft quite rapidly, we managed to do our objectives quite successfully even with very few aeroplanes. I didn't know what happened to my family because they were some distance away from me and communication was impossible at that time so I never knew what happened to my mother and my brother and sister. As the war came to the end we decided it would be the best idea to go to a neutral country and the closest to us was Romania and that's where we went. We were interned but our objective was to join the French Air Force and carry on fighting because freedom was something precious that we could not afford to lose. After being in Romania for three months we managed to contact the French Ambassador who was very sympathetic to our cause and promised us that we would get a passage to France and that's exactly what happened. End of 1939 some of my friends were already in France forming new squadrons and I joined them in January 1940 and we had brand new aeroplanes, all of a sudden the happiness came back because we could carry on where we left off after a defeat.

Well being a member of the French Air Force we took part in raids on Germany. France had very few pilots, therefore their squadrons were not ready for the operations straight away when we had experience of work in the field. Our pilots acclimatised themselves with the French aeroplanes and there was no bother for them to fly them and we in turn would keep them flying and repair them without any difficulties and we were very successful as a squadron. It was never revealed how many German planes we shot down because I don't think the French Air Force would like to compare their successes with ours, so it was always kept as a big secret but we knew very well that we scored more

hits than anybody else. There was a famous saying, well I don't know who invented it but everyday it was repeated that "We are fighting for our freedom and yours" and I think our freedom always came first, it was more important to us because we already lost it and when we added "and yours" then we expected them to give the same effort as we were giving.

We carried on like this until June 1940 and that's when the breach of the French defences occurred and practically chaos started. That time the British Expeditionary Army was evacuating in Dunkirk and our squadron came to a complete halt as delivery of fuel was always delayed and our aeroplanes were on the ground more than they were up and finally we lost most of them being destroyed on the ground so we were left without aeroplanes. Then we had to think what to do next and the order came that we could go to England providing we get the transport across the Channel and we could carry on to fight for our freedom all over again. So twice we were in the same position, once in Poland where we lost all of our equipment and the second time in France where we were grounded like ducks.

We came to England in July 1940, we landed in Liverpool and there was roughly about 4,000 Polish airmen on the liner called Arrandora Star and from Liverpool we were transported to a very big camp in Gloucester called Innsworth Lane. The very first thing that we are told is that we must learn the language before we can be attached to any squadron. So groups of airmen, groups of 20, were formed and one English airman without any experience of teaching decided that he would teach us English in as short a time as possible and it was possible because we worked at it 16 hours a day to achieve something like 1,000 words in English in about two months and only then were we sent to the squadron to work as fitters. Language was important because all the instructions were written in English and the engines were different from when we were in France.

We used French engines in Poland and we were very familiar with the French engines but in here everything was different. But where there is a will everything can be done and we managed somehow. Later on in 1940, Polish squadrons were formed where we had Polish flying personnel and fitters and that was a better arrangement because we could communicate with each other and that gave us extra strength. They relied on us, the flying personnel relied on us and we more or less didn't mind working extra hours and giving more out of ourselves because we knew that our friends are flying up there, they are taking a risk so we had to give them some support.

The first impressions I had when I came to England was the law and order, how everything was organised, without asking for anything it was more or less there. The most pleasant thing that happened to us was when we were on a train travelling from Liverpool to Gloucester to the camp in Innsworth Lane and in the middle of the night when the trains stopped in the dark station there was a noise like somebody was hitting a chair with a spoon, when we looked out of the window there was a lady in a funny hat and they were giving tea away and that was our first meeting with the Salvation Army. It was marvellous and they didn't ask for any money, anyway if they did we had none, we only had French Francs with us and they wouldn't accept them.

My time was spent, most of my days were spent on the airfields and evening time we had English classes, we wanted to improve our English and we always found volunteers from the nearest town to come and teach us. The towns were similar to Polish towns. Gloucester reminded me of the town where my auntie lived and Cheltenham was similar to the town where I lived in Poland full of grammar schools and trees growing both sides of the road and the cinemas that was the weekly pleasure that we could go and see a film.

When the war ended we could go for different courses which was organised by EVT and I chose several courses, I went to complete a plumbers course which I thought would be very handy as the work wasn't so different to a fitters. After finishing a plumbers course I applied to go on a photography course and I liked it even better because the work suited me down to the ground as I had some previous experience. Being in the forces I was always equipped with a camera and considered myself as an advanced amateur photographer. Finally when I was demobbed I obtained quite a good position as a photographer with a gallery in London. The work wasn't very interesting but it was very rewarding in many ways. At the same time the people that I worked for helped me find accommodation which was quite close to the place of work and I was quite happy working there. That was in Earls Court, the gallery doesn't exist anymore as the police station took the site. Once the gallery was closed I didn't carry on in this profession, I thought I would be much happier working as a fitter, continue my work with the aero engines and I joined Napiers of Acton and that suited me much better, I was very happy there. Soon the factory got closed and Rolls Royce offered me work in their own place where I carried on practically to retirement.

I kept in touch with Poland. When my mother was alive I used to visit her every year and I visit my sister and I kept in touch with some of my friends that I went to school with. But now I don't go there all that often but I still like to go and see what changes occurred up there.

When we first came to Britain we all had plans to go back to Poland and General Sikorski promised us as soon as the war ends we would take all the equipment, aeroplanes and everything else, and we carry on the work in Poland. That is why my squadron, my Polish squadron, 304, was named of Polish region and that was where we were going to settle after the war but as everybody knows the plans had been changed because General Sikorski died and the Yalta conference altered the whole course of our lives. I would never return to the Poland that is Communist and that's why I chose to live outside Poland. It suited me to settle in England because meeting English girl and marrying her there was no alternative, that was my adopted country.

My brother who took part in the war he joined me in England in 1947, he took part in Italy in fighting the Monte Cassino, he was in the army, and he emigrated to Australia but I thought England suited me much better. There are a few reasons why I stayed, one was that it's close to the continent and I could keep in touch with my mother, then my wife and then children. I wanted them to be educated in England and live normal lives and I think I succeeded.

# LUCYNA

Lucyna left Poland when she won a scholarship to the School of Fine Arts in Paris in 1948. She took refugee status when being pressed to break her studies to return to a communist Poland. In 1952 she married a Pole from London and has lived here ever since. She worked in many jobs until she took a teacher training course and began teaching Art and French until she retired.

Not everything I know about my homelife in Poland I actually remember, several details, which together composed the atmosphere in which I grew up, I learned from the older members of the family. For instance I have never seen my paternal grandfather, but know that the Tzar deported him to Siberia for many years. Released as an old, sick man, he was forbidden to return to his native land, he had to settle in Ukraine, he married a Ukrainian girl and soon died. My father was posthumous. My maternal grandfather on the other hand was a high officer in the Tzar's army and a hero of the Great War (even General Ironside mentions him in his memoirs), and he was Lithuanian. My mother was born in Latvia. I have also a drop of German blood and a drop of Bialorussian. My parents met and married in Archangel on the White Sea.

We moved to Wilno when I was 2. The flats were easy to get then and cheap. During our stay there a stork brought me a brand new baby brother. A sister I had already. For some reason or other we moved away when I was six. A year later our father left us, I have never seen him again.

In Poland children used to start school at the age of 7 but I had been taught at home. I entered straight into the secondary school when I was 10/12, but had to pass a very competitive exam first, only a quarter of the candidates were accepted. It was a very strict, old fashioned school, I felt utterly miserable there. The next one I liked much better, as my lungs were bad I was sent to a sanatorium school in the mountains in Rabka. I spent four years there. It was a small but very modern school, only now in Britain they are taking pride in progressive teaching which was already introduced there. I liked maths and science, Latin and, of course, art. I was quite good at sports too and was even in the volleyball team of my 6th form. Volleyball was very popular in Poland and so were all kinds of winter and water sports. We had a profusion of snow and water, everybody, even the poor youngsters, were able to take part in these activities. It was an exception rather than the rule to expect any expensive

equipment to be handed to us on a plate. We made most of the toys ourselves and cherished them. That was good for the development of our imagination, inventiveness and dexterity as well as learning to rely on our own or our group resources. We did not play either rounders or hockey, only boys played hockey, and that on ice only. Girls on the other hand had plenty of skipping games, as girls all over the world do. We played all sorts of chanting games, I was quite amazed when I came to England and I saw children native to this country playing the same games and chanting the same tunes. I wondered how those things spread, who taught them? The adults here were so different from us, almost like creatures from another planet, yet the children were the same here as they were in Poland. Was it something metaphysical? Or did the ideas come from the same common source, a kind of collective memory from our primitive ancestry?

In 1938 for health reasons I had to stop my normal school education, so I went to an introduction to art course. In the autumn of that year I was already in Warsaw, in the Art 6th form. The war surprised me back in Wilno. There I enrolled at the fine art faculty of the university. We had five changes of occupants, first the Russians came, then Lithuanians, then Russians again, Germans and then finally Russians in 1944. The art school was constantly closing and reopening under a different name but in the same building. I kept entering and leaving it, once I was even fired for alleged political sins, alleged but not committed. I also managed to pass my matriculation exams at the clandestine classes and took part in the activities of the Faculty of Culture of the clandestine university.

It is an impossible task to describe shortly our life during the war, all the anxieties and horrors suffered under our occupants, how we worked in the underground and how we kept our morale up. The loss of material goods was the least of the evils. Food shortages and malnutrition were already worse. Many people I knew died of TB, in some cases whole families were wiped out. Others died during the epidemic, apart from dysentery we had a terrible plague of typhoid fever. There was a strict order to report any suspicious cases, but hospitals were overflowing, people were lying on the floors between the beds and in the corridors, everywhere. They were put in there more in order to be isolated from the rest of society than in the hope of being cured.

We had our share of air raids too. There were times of relative respite with only occasional bombing, but there were also periods of fierce fighting in which aeroplanes as well as large guns and mortars were taking part. Only during the last period of fighting 30% of our town was destroyed. The worst of all was the

constant fear of being arrested, deported, executed or above all being tortured. The situation was even more complicated since from the beginning of the winter of 1938 we had a supplementary enemy within, Germany's friends, the Lithuanians.

The district was a real chessboard of nationalities, yet we used to live in perfect harmony with the minorities of Jews, Bialorussians, Tatars, Turks, Russians, Karaites, Georgians, Germans and Armenians. Some sources say that Lithuanians constituted 2% of the population, others say that they were only a fraction of a per cent. Inevitably there were intermarriages and they worked well on the whole. But now the families divided. I know of such where some siblings considered themselves very patriotic Poles, while others became Lithuanians and they were reinforced by the influx from Lithuania proper.

"Our brothers are coming" my mother said when the Lithuanians were taking over. We, her children, were not exactly overjoyed, but quite pleased nevertheless, as they were bringing some respite and some food, and we were starving. It happened like this: at the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact we were overrun by the Russians. They stayed for a few months only and then ceded us to the Lithuanians, in return asking only for military bases. They delayed leaving however, because among other things they needed time to clear all places and institutions of furniture and other equipment. I saw a lorry going from a hospital with a bunch of chamber pots tied high together like balloons. In June 1940 they came back. One day our milkwoman brought us fascinating news. "The war is over, madam" she said "there are French tanks outside the tollgates." "Did they speak French or Polish?" I asked. "They did not know any Polish, they spoke Russian. They had red marks on their caps." A couple of hours later we learned that Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia applied for "The great privilege of being admitted into the big family of the Soviet Republics" and that they were accepted. I am not joking, it was exactly like that. Arrests and deportations followed. The Russians were ousted by the Germans in June 1941. In the summer of 1944 they returned for good.

We were best organised during the German occupation. There was even a part of the country where the Germans did not dare to enter, it was called "Republic of..." I forget the name of the place, but it was occupied by our partisans. Life then was precarious, especially for the Jews. I saw a man hanged outside the cathedral for his terrible "crime": he was helping the Jews. It is not possible to quote all of the hundreds, nay, thousands of awful things that happened. But let me give you an example.

We were in Nowo-Swieciany. That day my mother and brother went with a friend in search of food, some 30km away; during the war it was quite an escapade. My brother had just unexpectedly dropped in because of the arrests of the partisans in his region. They came back frightened as there was an explosion in that locality, two Germans and their secretary were killed. The secretary was earlier a girlfriend of one of the Starowierys and it was they who in vengeance put the bomb under the car. It was announced with the specific logic of those times that it was done by the Polish Communists. In retaliation hostages were taken, about ten or twelve from each of four towns, some of which were even further from the place of the explosion than ours. The "Communists" taken from our town were professional men, two priests, the local intelligentsia except for one who had a lot of children but was a thief. The Lithuanian police were given the task of executing them. The Burgermaster brought them to our nationalised house where there was a restaurant or rather a canteen. He treated them to plenty of food and drink; they were all red with excitement when they left. Among them were some civilians who volunteered for the job! I recognised two of them. The hostages were kept for almost 24 hours in the police station; the next morning they were taken to the place of execution, some were thrown from the lorry already dead; one of the priests' skull was half blown out, his brains scattered all over; they were so terribly, so brutally beaten. But why? What for? They were obviously innocent, not even communists. The Poles had nothing to do with that bomb. Did the abusers derive so great a gratification from their action to make the effort worthwhile? Would it not have been more opportune to simply shoot the poor devils as ordered? I can only hope that these inhuman criminals did not have time to flee when the Russians came for the last time.

When the Russians came again they behaved as they did on the previous occasions: arrests, killings, deportations, rapes and robbery were rife. People were kept in overcrowded prisons for months, they were often kept standing as there was no place to sit down. Those transported to Siberia had to travel squeezed like sardines in goods trains for a couple of months with next to no food or drink. Instead of a loo they had a hole in the floor, but not all managed to push their way up to it. There was dysentery and other illnesses and many died during the transportation. At the beginning it was mostly the Poles who were arrested. The Lithuanians' turn came later. When in 1945 the option for Poland was opened it was amazing to see these hardened Lithuanians turning Poles by the scores of hundreds.

The war was not yet finished when we left Wilno opting for Poland, it was on Palm Sunday 1945.

After months of wandering I landed in Krakow. On my names' day, June 30th, I was accepted to the end of the second year of studies at the Academy of Fine Arts. In 1948 I had a stroke of luck, I won a French Government scholarship. I arrived in Paris on December 22nd with three months of my scholarship lost. A couple of months later they started calling me back, which was absurd as my passport was valid for a whole year and my scholarship could not be transferred to anybody else. The Polish Embassy's people were on my side, they tried to help and were very courteous in the beginning, but the pressure on them was such that they had to change tune and began pressing me more and more and eventually threatening me. It was the time of the Stalinist terror. They managed to frighten me so much that I decided to become a refugee. On March 19th 1952 I met my husband, a Pole from London, he had heard about me, what he had heard must have been flattering, because he proposed after only an hour and a half of acquaintance. We married seven months later and it is due to this incident that I came to live in London.

I never went back to my country. If I did so now I would not fit in. During the last 40 years my habits and my way of life has changed in one way, while there the people and their customs have changed in another. Also I cannot forget the awful nightmares I had at the time when I was contemplating asking for political asylum. For some reason, maybe a family funeral, I am back there, lose my papers and cannot get out. I am so angry with myself, "You. idiot, why did you go there?" A friend in a similar situation had almost identical experiences.

Of course, like most normal people I have a nostalgia for the land of my childhood, but that place is now in the USSR.

## MALGORZATA

Malgorzata left Poland when she was 19 with her mother and sister in 1940. They travelled to Finland where she enrolled as an art student. After a year she moved to Sweden and another art school and finally in late autumn 1942 came to Britain and joined the Polish section of the ATS. After being discharged on health grounds she went to Edinburgh College of Art where she obtained a diploma in sculpture. After a year she moved with her family to London. She worked in several commercial and industrial photographic studios until she retired.

The outbreak of the war affected us very badly because my father was an army officer and when Wilno decided to surrender to the Russians my father left the town with the army to go to Lithuania, the neighbouring country, where he was interned and my mother, my sister and I and our cook and our dog were left in our flat in Poland. We were crying our eyes out because the town was going to surrender to the Russians and we went to bed crying. One night the Polish Army was leaving, sad night, and next morning something terrible happened, it was this terrible noise a real infernal noise, rattling noise and we all jumped out of bed to see what was happening. That was a long line of Russian tanks going through the street and we stood on the balcony to see our own town being invaded by a foreign army. Those Russian tanks - it was one after another, they were grinding past our balconies, some of them had red flags on and we just stood on the balcony and we knew that our world collapsed. When they all finished and went on we just sat in our flat not knowing what to do. Our cook who was a very practical woman heard from somebody that the Polish Army left their stores open and people could help themselves to food if they wished so that it wouldn't go to Russian hands. So our cook went there and she returned with a huge big bag of dried peas, I don't know how she had the strength to carry it, and she was very pleased with herself and we were still sitting in the flat my mother, my sister and I and she said "Well I'm going to get something else" and she went off again. This time she came back empty handed because Russians had started shooting at people helping themselves to food. I remember she came back and had a mark on her arm because one of the bullets grazed her arm so she said she didn't think it was wise to try anymore. Then the occupation started which was absolutely, well it was so different, suddenly the shops were empty, you couldn't buy anything. We had no food except this bag of dried peas.

The refugees had some committees which were formed to help them but we were not refugees, we were expected to look after ourselves. So we had this soup day after day after day and that kept us going through the whole winter. There were bread queues, the cook always stood in several bread queues at the time. She was a very good woman, really looked after us well and she brought some bread for us and for our friends who were also useless and helpless. She organised the food very well considering. Oh yes one funny thing: in the middle of winter when you didn't expect to get anything from anybody suddenly a postman arrived and he brought us half of a smoked pig which was sent from our country home at the beginning of the war and it arrived in January or something like that, it travelled and no one stole it, it was addressed to us and from then on we had the pea soup with bits of smoked pork in it. Anyway it arrived safely, a bit late, the weather was freezing so it didn't go off.

We left Poland when my mother realised that the Russians were coming again, the second time. I don't know whether you realise the Russians invaded Wilno, Eastern Poland once, then they gave Wilno to Lithuanians, then they decided to invade Lithuania as well, so the second coming of Russians my mother thought we shouldn't push our luck anymore and as we had Polish passports with visas for Sweden, and for Finland just in case, she decided it was no good waiting to be deported and one day she made up her mind and we left our flat as it was, everything intact. We went to Kaunas which was in Lithuania and my mother bought air tickets to Helsinki, she paid with golden spoons which we took from home just in case, which was a very wise move.

We went to Riga by train, Riga in Latvia, and in Riga we took this plane to Helsinki and that's how we left Poland, in a very comfortable way on a German plane as well! That was Lufthansa, we nearly died of shock when we realised. When my mother boarded the plane she said to me "I'm sorry if I did that silly thing because they may take us to Germany instead of Helsinki when they realise we have Polish passports." But they were not interested, we paid for the tickets and they delivered us to Helsinki. My father who escaped from the internment camp in Lithuania was already there to greet us, so that was how we left Poland. It was a very chaotic situation because Russians were coming and the Lithuanians were terrified because they suddenly realised what was happening so they were quite helpful to us. Normally Lithuanians would be very bureaucratic, they would demand papers and everything, but when they realised the Russians were coming to get them as well, suddenly the Lithuanians in Kaunas were very helpful to us to get out of the country in time, which was a very good thing.

I remember even the Lithuanian minister of some sort bought our golden spoons because he wanted to give us money for the air tickets. So suddenly we were all together because Poles and Lithuanians didn't see eye to eye, but with the Russian threat everything changed.

I came to England to join the Polish Army. Yes I was terribly patriotic. We were quite safe in Sweden, I was going to art school, everything was nice, father was sending money from England because he already went to England, but I wanted to join the Polish forces so I dropped everything and came here.

We did have plans to go back to Poland the minute the war ended but as you know it didn't turn out that way. My first impressions of this country were not very good, not good at all. We flew from Stockholm, my mother, my sister and I very confident that we will be welcomed with open arms, you know the allies are coming to join the war effort. The minute we landed in Aberdeen the secret service was very suspicious of us and they didn't release us. They took us under police guard to Douglas Hotel in Aberdeen and they kept us in this hotel under police guard. Did we look like spies? I was 21 and my mother was absent minded and my sister was 18. They employed all the tricks you could think of, they let us go to bed, the minute we were asleep they would drag us out of bed and start questioning all over again. That was going on for two days, they were not satisfied so they took us under police escort all the way from Aberdeen to London. The train was crowded and everybody stood in the corridors but we had a compartment to ourselves my mother, my sister, me, a policeman and a policewoman. They kept the light on all night so we wouldn't do anything silly and we were dog tired, two sleepless nights already.

They took us under police guard to a place called Patriotic School, I don't know whether you heard about this place. That was in South London, I believe it was in Nightingale Lane, and that's where they kept real spies and interrogated them. There we were my mother, my sister and I. Which in turn was called and interrogated to see if we would tell the same story. My sister was making fun of them and she was telling improbable stories that we flew by magic carpet and things like that and she was really making fun of them and they got so irritated because telling them stories that we flew in by magic carpet was a bit much even for secret service, they had no sense of humour at all. That was going on and on and my mother one day said "Well we can't have it like this, we're going on hunger strike because the English don't like people going on hunger strike."

So we went on hunger strike, that was no sacrifice at all because the food was horrid, really horrid, you know the WVS giving us sort of lumpy custard and watery greens and all that sort of food. So we went on hunger strike and they were all coming begging us to eat and my mother said 'No' and we said "No" and they couldn't stand it anymore. So after a few days of hunger strike they decided to release us. So they said "You are free to go" and my mother said "We're not going until the British Government apologises to us." Oh she was full of fantasies. Well they couldn't find anybody from British Government but she said she wouldn't move until we had apology from the British Government. So they sent a chap who looked like somebody from the Government, he had pin-stripe trousers and jacket and was all in black and very solemnly said "In the name of the British Government I am apologising to you and to your daughters for the treatment you got." My mother was satisfied, she said "Well I suppose that will do." Then she said to us "Well he is not very important but obviously he is somebody from the ministry." So they were very much relieved, they put us into a taxi and they dumped us on the steps of the Polish Consulate. They took over and contacted my father who was with the forces. We were demanding all the time to be put through to our father or to some Polish authorities, but they wouldn't, they just wanted a confession from us.

When I finished my studies in Edinburgh and I went to London I got my first job without any problem in a photographic studio. But the second job, I suppose it was in 1950 I applied for a job at Wallace Heaton which was a big photographic firm in London and I was told in the labour exchange, (where I had to report when I found myself a job) that I can't have it because I was not allowed to take this job unless there was no suitable British candidate for it. That was a thing you did not know what to do because the place could have been filled in. So I went back to a labour exchange in Hendon, I lived in Hendon then, and I said that I have this problem and a very kind lady in the labour exchange said to me that she will stop that nonsense soon and she telephoned Wallace Heaton and she was assured there was no British candidate waiting for this job and then they were allowed to accept me. I think I had a letter from somebody in authority saying there was not a suitable British applicant. That was the only time I really felt a second class citizen.

I have kept links with Poland, I go there from time to time because I still have some of my cousins there but I wouldn't go there when my parents were alive because my father was convinced that the minute I step in Poland I would be arrested and thrown into gaol. So I waited until he died and then immediately he died I went for my first visit to Poland which was about 25 years ago.

I came back to England and I said I would never go back to Poland again, it's terrible, it's like a prison but after a few years I changed my mind, I went again and it did seem a bit less frightening and everytime I go to Poland it seems less strange and less and less frightening. I don't know if it is because Poland is changing to a more liberal style or whether I am getting used to all the restrictions, I don't know.

P.S. The dog left in Poland with our cook survived the war and died peacefully of old age. She was less lucky, heavily wounded in a bombing raid, but recovered.

# RITA

Rita at 26 years of age joined the Polish forces formed in Russia. With the army she travelled to Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Egypt and finally to Italy where she took active part as a nurse. In 1946 she arrived in Britain and soon settled in West London. She worked as a shop assistant and after a year opened her own delicatessen with her husband in Shepherds Bush.

I was born in Sosnowiec where I lived with my brother and parents. My father was a professional military man. He accepted his early retirement pension and began to work in a bank.

In Sosnowiec the air was polluted and not very pleasant. My parents decided to move to Wilno to be farther away from our western neighbours and be closer to our relations. Wilno was a nice town full of schools and retired people. My parents went there to spend their twilight years. There was one university, Stefan Batory, and my parents had high hopes that one day we shall attend it.

I had a great desire to study dentistry in Werszawa, perhaps it would have been more rewarding but when I obtained my matriculation certificate I attended university. After one year I went to Werszawa where I met quite a number of students who came from Wilno. After receiving a degree I married my boyfriend who studied in Warsaw Polytechnic. He obtained a position in Nowy Bytom which was situated one mile from the German border. I had a job too which was some distance away in Sosnowiec. In Silesia married women couldn't work as they had to give men priority. Sosnowiec was just outside the boundary. The journey to work started at 6am and I was home quite late but when you are young it is not a big effort.

The day before war broke out my husband was called up to the army, we thought it was just manoeuvres. The next day I started my daily drive to work but all the traffic was going in the other direction. A policeman stopped me and announced that we are in a state of war and the Germans are already in Nowy Bytom. I turned back home not realising that this was to be the beginning of a very long trek. My friends, whom I worked with, decided that we must leave immediately so we packed some of our belongings into two cars, mine was a small car, a Simca, the other a bit bigger. Then we sped eastwards to get as far from the approaching Germans as possible.

When we reached Luck we thought we were safe not realising that the Russians had attacked Poland from the east, it was a proper stab in the back. When the Russians entered Luck we watched the procession of their soldiers, they even included concrete mixers amongst the artillery and they drove around the town for hours to make it look like there were thousands of them. Amongst us was a paymaster who promptly paid us our wages, even for the following month as he knew the money would be confiscated by the Russians. Proper disorder descended, people in uniforms were arrested. I met two young soldiers whom I gave all my money so they would buy themselves civilian clothes. They were very embarrassed as they had no idea how to return the cash. I urged them to make a purchase as soon as possible, I never knew what happened to them.

My car was impounded but everyday I went to visit it. During one of the visits the Commandant offered to buy it off me, I agreed and a bargain was struck. At the same time he offered to take me to the theatre, I declined and told him that I wouldn't be seen with an oppressor. All I wanted was to find my father, brother and husband. Lwow was my next step, I had friends there. The Russians carried out some sort of census that was a plan for dispersing people.

Not waiting very long a telegram came from my father who was in Wilno. Immediately I caught a train to be with him, unfortunately the train stopped at Lida some distance from Wilno. There was no other way but to walk but I wasn't alone, quite a number of people wanted the same destination. We decided to walk during the night. I went to the railway station to get something to eat, as soon as I sat down two Russian officers sat at the same table. When I ordered my meal I addressed the waitress as Miss, they did not like that, they said they would prefer it if I called her comrade.

When the darkness fell we started to walk, it was not easy as we didn't know the way. We walked single file in total silence, the moon wasn't out but you could see quite a bit. All of a sudden we heard horses' hooves, everybody laid down and froze, we all thought the Russian cavalry would find us but we were lucky. We continued to walk through the night but we knew that we were lost so two young students volunteered to go ahead to find some help. They reached a village and knocked on the door of the first house. The owner gave them directions and told them if they went to the next house they would be arrested as NKVD (Russian Secret Service) were stationed there.

We were very relieved to see our two students come back, they were our guides now. All sorts of hurdles were encountered on our way, a forest with thick undergrowth and then the River Wake. The bridge was destroyed only one beam was spanning the river. I had to gather all my courage to perform this feat, you could hear the roaring river under your feet but we all crossed safely and reached Wilno.

I found my father and father-in-law, luck was on my side. Mrs Petruszewicz organised a committee to help displaced people and she offered me a job. To get any employment was very difficult as Wilno was under Lithuanian occupation and the official language was Lithuanian which I did not know. We organised dormitories for the homeless, schools for children, help for the wounded in hospitals and the distribution of clothing which was donated by the Red Cross.

This idyllic life did not last long, the Russians invaded Lithuania, my father and I were arrested besides hundreds of others. Young Jewish men worked with NKVD, they knew exactly where Poles lived, they distinguished themselves by red arm bands. Even Polish Jews were betrayed by them, they had no mercy. We were loaded on the lorries and taken to the railway station. During the journey I spotted my brother who took his cap off and was waving to us. That was the last time I ever saw him. At the railway station we were segregated, my father went to the Urals by the River Soswa region where he was a tree feller. The poor man only lived five months, hard labour killed him.

I was taken to Altajin the middle of the Steppe region. We were told by NKVD that this was where we were going to live and work. I registered myself as a seamstress, driver and a nurse. They directed me to a house where a young couple lived with a small son. I had a very small room, one table and a chair, there was no light there. Some time later I bought some straw to sleep on, it was sheer luxury but not for long as it was infested with bed bugs. There was no sanitation at all. Fuel was unobtainable so animal dung was mixed with straw, dried in the sun at the brick farm. It was called kiziaki, when burned it gave little heat but plenty of smoke. I worked in a workshop where we made uniforms for the army. Then I was transported to a barber shop, men called to serve in the forces had to have their hair cut, they were all infested by lice.

When General Sikorski signed an agreement with Stalin we were freed, amnesty was announced on the radio. The winter came with the Germans, each day it was colder and colder, we knew that we would never survive the winter. There was one remedy, go south where the Polish army was forming

into units. We bribed the station master who let us have one goods wagon and we went to Farab where we could work on cotton plantations. When Christmas came we pooled our money together and we bought a ram, it was a very welcome addition to our meagre diet.

Soon after Easter Krukowski delegated me to take dispatches to Buzuluku, it was a great honour for me to be chosen for such an important position. Headquarters in Buzuluku was in a big building which had its own chapel where I attended mass. I was given a uniform and became a member of the army. They gave me documents, dispatches and money which I had to take back to Buzuluku. The train journey was a nightmare. Halfway they discovered that somebody was infected with typhoid and the whole train was going to be isolated and everybody had to be disinfected. I could not go through that procedure as all my papers and money would be destroyed. I took a chance and boarded the next train secretly and reached my destination. Our camp was a hive of activity, officers were elected, men were joining the army and we were issued with English uniforms. Nobody had a rifle so they made them out of wood to practise drill with.

London decided to send us to Persia, we crossed the Caspian Sea in a very old ship. We met other Polish soldiers in tropical kit, how different we looked in our woolly bottle dresses. We all felt like we were newly born, we were free after so many months of being suppressed, starved, living without any hope. At last we had a glimmer of light that each of us will contribute as much as we can toward the war effort.

The next stop was Egypt then Italy where fighting was in full swing, we all tried to do impossible tasks as we expected that this would be the last stage before we reached our homeland. But it wasn't to be, politicians have seen to that, the country was sold down the river.

When we came to England we were disillusioned and knew we were destined to further wanderings. Some people returned to Poland to be arrested and imprisoned. Others went to Canada, Argentina or Australia. My husband and I toyed with the idea of going to Ecuador, we even started to learn Spanish. After a year I started to work in a hairdressing business and my husband in retail. Not having much experience he went bankrupt. The second time around we opened a delicatessen shop where we both worked together. The time came to retire and I hope to be in good health to see what other changes the future will bring.

# CZESLAW

Czeslaw was captured by the Russians in 1940 when he was 16. Then in 1941 he was captured by the Germans and sent to a camp in Lithuania. In 1944 he escaped his captors and joined the Polish Army in France. He came to England in January 1945 and three years later settled in South London.

I got three brothers and three sisters, still all living in Poland. I am the oldest boy. I left Poland in 1944 when I was 16 or 17. I went to school but I didn't get my certificate because, well my father wasn't that keen to keep me at school, he took me out of school and sent me to work. I started school when I was seven years old and I left when I was not quite fourteen. I had another year to go to get the certificate. It was a mixed school, boys and girls together. Polish and white Russians was in it as well. Subjects! Well first of all there was writing and reading, history and sums. I was very good at everything really and I would have liked to learn more but my father couldn't afford to keep me at school. He said I had to get out of school and go and work for a living, and I did. I enjoyed school because I did very much like to learn. My teacher was very good, the teacher was a lady and after she retired they gave the class to a man teacher, he was with us until the war broke out. As a child in winter time we played snowballs and skating. Summertime, swimming and fishing. I used to love skating, I used to go out in the moonlight at night. When I started working I didn't have much time for it.

I was working in a forest cutting timber and I was working on a farm, I wasn't that keen on working on the farm but I liked working in the forest.

The outbreak of the war affected my family very much. When the Russians came in 1939 we hardly had any food at home. We tried to survive, father tried his best. It was not very safe for me to stay at home because the Russians tried to get me, they wanted to take me to Russia to educate me. I was against this, I didn't want education from the Russians, no way. I was supposed to go to Moscow to be educated but I went to the forest. The Jerries attacked the Russians in 1941 on June 21st and the Germans caught me, I go from one hands to the other and that's it. They kept me in my hometown for about three or four weeks, I escaped from there and they got me again. Then they take me to Lithuania, I was there for four months, I was in a big camp. It was very bad, no food, the food was terrible, people were dying of hunger.

Then they took me to Germany, I had no way out, I had to eat raw potatoes and grass to survive. I escaped two times from Germany. Four of my friends from my hometown were killed and I came out alive. There were many times in my life that I thought I was going to die, I've seen death many times and thought I can't get out of that.

The first time I was working in a steel mine and I escaped from there and I was in France for one month. For four weeks I was free, I was free but I had nothing to eat. I tried not to get in trouble but the Germans caught me again, beat me up and put me back to camp. They told me they were going to execute me then, shoot me. I said why not shoot me, shoot me now, they didn't. I waited until I had a chance when they took us to Luxemburg by train, so I jumped out of the train. That was the only way out- to jump out of the train, to survive or die. All my friends died because the Americans bombed that train. They thought they were transporting the German Army but the only Germans were on top of the coal wagons, they smashed the lot but I jumped out before that.

Then I went to France, back to France. A German soldier came to me and spoke fluent Polish and said to me "Get out", the war wasn't far he said "Get out or you'll be shot", they set fire to the village. I ran to the forest but you know when somebody is chasing you you have no strength to run, but I did get out and after that I went to a Russian camp. I told them I was Russian, I told them where I came from in Russia, I spoke Russian. I was given plenty food, cigarettes, plenty to drink. I stayed there about three weeks, after that I saw two Americans and a Polish officer, they said "any Polish people step forward". Only I stepped forward and everybody looked at me because I had said I was Russian. So I went and joined the Polish Army in France. I joined the army and from there, there were a lot of us, it took two big ships to transport us to England.

During 1945 I came to England. My first impressions were very surprising to see how people live in this country. In Scotland, we were in Scotland, the sheep were covered in snow. I was in a tin hut, the water for shaving was ice in the morning in the buckets. Second, when they gave us tea they gave us it with milk, I couldn't drink it. Not just me, a lot of us couldn't drink that tea with milk, it made us feel sick, so we asked for black tea. There were lots of things that we didn't see in Poland. Gradually we got used to things and came to accept them. When I went to be demobbed in 1947 I was thinking how are we going to manage in this country, we had nothing. Everyone had to think about their future, there were three ways out.

Number one, go back to Poland, number two, sign up as a British reserve and number three get out of this country and go to any country you like. So I had to pick one of the three. They wanted to send me to Orkney, as a displaced person, 5 shillings a week was the pay. I signed for a British reserve for three years. If anything happened we would have been the first in the firing line, all the Polish who signed up. Eventually I was finally demobbed in 1948.

My first job was in Bedford, a big factory. I was working shift work, mostly nights I worked because it was good money there. In the same year I came to London and I have lived here ever since. When I came to London I had different jobs, I got married and I looked for a better job and better money. I had to do my best to bring my family up. I had a lot of jobs here. I kept on changing until I got satisfaction, until I got a good job. Eventually I got it with British Airways in London Airport. I was twenty years there, I took early retirement in 1982.

I didn't have many problems with the language, not really. I picked up English very fast, not just English, I speak Czech, French, my French is very rusty now, German. I am very interested in learning languages but believe you me English is very hard to learn, it has different pronunciations, different spellings, different everything. For you the Polish language is the same I suppose.

I had problems finding accommodation in the beginning but I found a place. Every ex-Polish soldier in civvy life had to report to the police station when you changed accommodation or job, if you don't report you are in trouble. There was a year when we were stopped being treated like aliens and had a kind of British citizenship, a special status but not quite British. It went on until about 1955 or 56. After that they scrapped it but even so it was hard to get a job. When you went for a job they said there were none, not because you were Polish but that there wasn't any jobs. There were jobs though, it was because we were Polish. There was no problems with accommodation as long as you pay the rent.

When I worked in British Airways I had a chance to go to Poland but not with a Polish passport, I was not going with a Polish passport so I took British nationality so I could go to Poland. I'm still Polish, I'm proud to be Polish. But the British passport doesn't save me in Poland, no way, if they want to do anything they can do it, the British passport means nothing in Poland.

I have kept links with Poland, I wrote letters to my father who died in 1972 and I still write to my sister who is living there. I went for the first time to Poland in 1969 and the last time I went was in 1984, I'm going this year again. But before that I used to go every year or every two years to Poland. I like to go to see what it's like in Poland. Between 1969 and 1984 there is a lot of difference. More people have got more freedom, there is more in the shops and the people are more open. I was in Poland at the time of Martial Law and I couldn't get back to London, three days I was stuck in Warsaw. There were no flights, I couldn't send any messages to my wife, nothing. I rang to my wife one day and I got through to London and after that I was cut out from Poland. Nothing to the west, no telegrams, no phone, nothing. Three days I was sitting in Warsaw. I felt terrible, I'll tell you what, them three days was to me like three weeks but eventually I got to Copenhagen, from Copenhagen I came to London. I wasn't that worried, I knew I'd get out but my wife was worried because she thought I won't come back.

It was always in my mind to go back to Poland when I first came to Britain but when Russia came second time I knew there was no way I could go there, we knew what was going on there, we couldn't live under that regime in Poland.

# JANINA BARANOWSKA



**Polish artist Janina Baranowska, b. 1925 in Grodno, Poland.**

Photo taken in her studio by Joanna Ciechanowska (present POSK Gallery Director)

Baranowska stayed in Poland until the outbreak of the Second World War; in 1940 she was arrested and deported to Russia. Two years later she joined the Polish Army, as they marched to the Middle East.

In 1946 she came to London and studied under David Bomberg at Borough Polytechnic (1947-50).

She was a Director of POSK Gallery until 2006.

On the cover of this booklet:

Janina Baranowska, 'Young Couple' - oil on canvas, 1967

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