

Interviews with Polish Refugees from the Second World War

These are extracts from interviews undertaken with Polish refugees from the Second World War.

These extracts have been put together from the book *Moving Lives: Narratives of Nation and Migration among Europeans in Post-War Britain* (Kathy Burrell, 2006). Both interviewees' names have been changed.

[Interview with 'Anna' - she was deported as a child to Siberia from eastern Poland with her mother and siblings. She ended up living in Britain after the war.](#)

It was very snowy, the snow was over a metre deep, frost very severe, 10th February 1940. They were getting ready and the partisans and the Russian soldiers came with the guns, with the rifles. They gave my mother half an hour to get ready, that was at 4 o'clock in the morning. I was awake. They [Russian soldiers] came in and told us to take warm clothes, nothing else but warm clothes. Unluckily we had no bread because my mother was going to make it, so we couldn't even take any bread. My brother took a knife and killed some chickens and we put them in a sack. We didn't know where we were going, but it came out that it was Siberia. We had two solid weeks going by train in the cattle tucks to Siberia....

I could tell you something but it could be a bit shocking. There is an incident in my life, I have robbed a hanged man. We were again thrown into a sheep sty, there was no comfort whatsoever, you live or you die. It was springtime and my mother wanted me to get something to eat, I was collecting wild grown garlic. There was another woman and she told me that a man had hanged himself in the next hut, and she said to me to go and see if he has any money in his pockets. I was eleven then. You don't have to be told twice when you are fighting for your life. The grass was taller than me perhaps, and through the little path I went to that dilapidated hut, and saw the man hanging up, he had hanged himself. I looked at his eyes, his eyes were right out. But I didn't care, I did not care, because you adjust yourself to the situation you are in. I saw the wallet was sticking out in the jacket, and I took his wallet and ran back. After that my mother had some money....

In 1941 we had an amnesty, General Anders. We managed to come out of Siberia, the four of us, my mother, my two brothers and myself, somehow we survived, perhaps we come from good healthy stock. From Siberia to The Caucasus, it took three months, we were travelling three months in the cattle trucks. It was full of lice, full of lice, in Siberia there were so many bedbugs. At night they come like ants, it's

unbelievable that anybody could live in these circumstances. They were coming in bed, they were just eating us, terrible....

When we arrived my brother joined the Polish army. It was severe winter, very, very severe winter. We had typhoid there. They left a group of Poles in a community centre in a village, and three of us they took to the mountains. The Caucasians gave us horse milk, leaving it on the door step. They gave us a sheep stable, we just slept like a sheep in the hay. That was the circumstances, you live or not live. You had to live or not live....

At the beginning of August the Polish army came and took us, I remember this, this was how we left Russia. On the 6th of August we crossed the border, we went to Karachi, to Mombasa, then we landed in the jungle in Uganda.

Interview with 'Jan'. He was deported to Siberia from eastern Poland by Soviet troops as a teenager, eventually joined the Polish army and ended up in the Allied Air Force, demobbed in Britain at the end of the war.

Most of the people who came from the Bruntingthorpe [de-mobbing] camp settled around the Highfields area [in Leicester]. We were disorganised, there were 82 airmen to start with, the officers from the camp. We kept meeting just outside Lewis' [department store] to just have a chat, as a sort of meeting place. Everybody knew Lewis' then. We decided to do something useful and find some accommodation to organise ourselves. One of the fathers from Holy Cross church, I don't quite remember how he got involved with the Polish people, but he took care of the Poles in Leicester, and he agreed to give us a small room in the priory upstairs, and that's how the Polish combatants [club] started, that was 1947, '48. I was one of the first in the committee then, of course most of the people are dead now. We decided to start the Polish community, we had mass in the Holy Cross church. We had a Polish priest who was one of the chaplains who was with the forces, so he spoke the mass in Holy Cross church in Polish, and all the time they were informed that there was an ex-combatant club, if anybody wanted to join they were welcome. Of course the association grew to about 800 people. By contribution, by subscription, we decided that that small place wasn't big enough for us, so we decided to buy a bigger place, a home, a house, that would be suitable for gatherings for people. This is the place which we bought in 1956, '57, and it still is our place. People by hard work became richer and better off, and we decided to buy a church. Of course that was difficult, we had money but not enough to buy a church. There was a councillor who was very helpful to us, and he found a suitable place that was for sale on Melbourne Road, on the corner of Dale Street. When we went to look at it everybody seemed to like it, and so we decided to buy. We managed to get a loan ... by scraping every penny we could find, we got it.