

"A Forgotten Odyssey"

~ an epic of human courage of survivors of the Soviet forced labour camps ~

"One of the most disturbing documentaries I have ever seen."

Richard Morrison, The Times, London



*Basia and Farynka Sgrunowski on the train to Krasnovodzk, 23 March 1942
(private archives of Zofia Jordanowska – courtesy of VideoFact).*

Historical Notes for the USA

June 2002

Compiled by Stefan Wisniewski, Sydney, Australia (2001)
and with thanks to Art Wagner, Detroit, USA (2002)



Under the auspices of the Association of Siberian Deportees In Australia
With thanks to the Polish Arts Foundation and the Third Carpathian Division in London

For more information visit

www.AforgottenOdyssey.com

www.feniks.net

"A Forgotten Odyssey"

Written and directed by Jagna Wright
Produced by Jagna Wright and Aneta Naszynska
Edited by Aneta Naszynska
Music by Sebastian Krajewski

London-based Jagna Wright's film, "A Forgotten Odyssey", is the story - as told by the survivors - of what happened after the Soviet invasion of Poland on 17 September 1939 under the Nazi-Soviet Friendship Treaty.

These are the stories of the survivors of the forced Soviet annexation of eastern Poland, when entire towns and communities were brutally deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan to Soviet forced labour camps. By the time the Nazis attacked their Soviet allies in 1941, perhaps half of the labour camp inmates had died from disease, starvation, and the harsh labour conditions.

Because the Soviets were brought into the anti-Nazi Alliance, the remaining survivors were given an amnesty and many made their way across the vast and foreboding Soviet landscape to join the freed Polish Army being formed in the south. This army became a key element of the Allied forces in the European South-East, and was evacuated through Iran to join the battle with the Nazis in Africa and Italy.

However, despite the defeat of the Nazis, Poland's Soviet enemies ended the war on the side of the victors. The 116,000 citizens and soldiers who had escaped from Soviet Russia went on to be refugees from a pre-war Poland who could never return home to their former homeland, which was left in Soviet Communist hands after the war.

Their Forgotten Odyssey never reached its destination, and they remained a people in exile throughout the world.

A message from the film-makers

The film was made with the aim of saving an important historical episode of the Second World War from oblivion.

It was by no means an episode which can be seen as insignificant; after all it involved at least 1.7 million people, and the human suffering which they experienced was immeasurable – and yet, no Western history books mention this ordeal, and no politicians honor its victims in their speeches commemorating World War 2. Television channels had no interest in commissioning the film about it, on the grounds that they "had already covered this period in history extensively", and that "the public was tired of the subject of World War 2."

In the words of a Russian Journalist, Poles deported by Stalin to Russia were then deported from history by Western historians. This is surely very wrong. The accounts of the Second World War are simply incomplete without this neglected historical tragedy.

We made this film to rescue this "forgotten odyssey" from turning into an "odyssey that never was". We believed that, despite it being made with no professional or financial backup, the strength of the survivors' testimonies would move at least some people to help bring this story to light. We believed that making this story known to the Western world was a matter of historical and moral justice. We believed that eventually we would find someone who would see beyond the technical imperfections of the film, purely on the strength of the powerful and moving testimonies of the survivors of the ordeal in Stalin's hands.

We started with two public showings in London in 2001, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and at the Imperial War Museum (the latter sponsored by the Polish Ambassador, Dr Stanislaw Komorowski). Then, several articles in the British press as well as mentions on the BBC radio gradually, but effectively, started breaking the wall of silence around this subject. Finally on 17th September 2001, the anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland, we achieved our original goal of having the film screened on television, on the British History Channel and on Channel One of Polish Television.

However, the unbelievable fact that we have now visited North America twice to present our film was the result of something we never bargained for – the deep need of the "second generation" of the Poles, sons and daughters of the Siberian survivors, to learn their roots, and to do justice to their parents' and grandparents' memories.

The film went global because a pair of Russian journalists, Zhenya and Sasha Donde, saw the film in London and put out stories on it on the BBC World Service, in Russian, and in the Russian newspaper "Novoye Vremya". The story was spotted in Poland by Wladyslaw Czapski, a Siberian survivor, who translated it into Polish and put on his website. This, in turn, was chanced upon by Stefan Wisniowski, the son of a Siberian survivor living in Sydney, Australia, who tracked us down and asked for a videocassette.

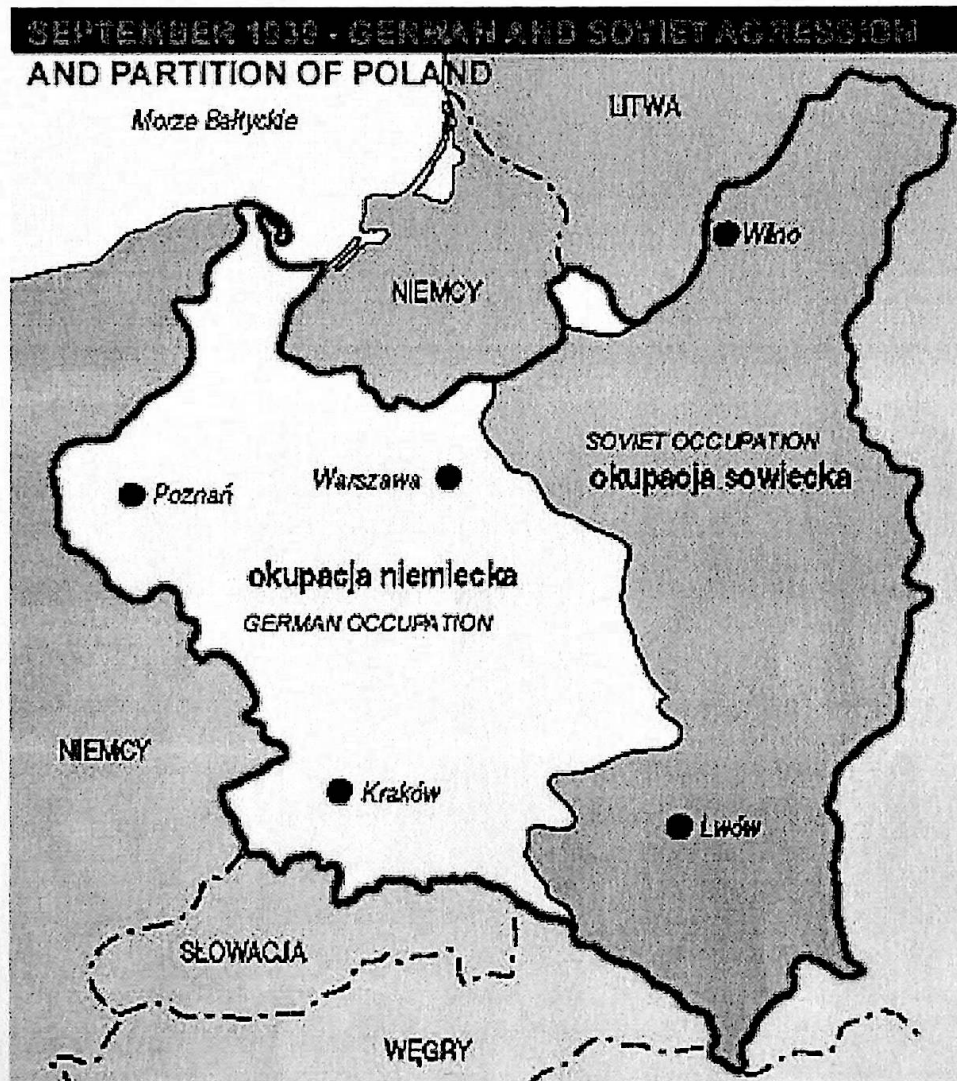
That turned out to be a real breakthrough, and fruits of his enthusiasm and passion were soon borne out with a public showing in Sydney's State Library of New South Wales. Building on that successful screening, Stefan campaigned amongst Polish émigré organisations to take on the project of spreading this story throughout the Western world. Through his Kresy-Siberia internet network inspired by the film, volunteers came forward to set up screenings in dozens of cities in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA.

We would especially like to thank the many organizers of the screenings in the USA, including promoters Wesley Adamczyk in Chicago, Chuck Slomski in Baltimore, and Art Wagner in Detroit. Finally, thanks to Mrs Margaret Bonikowska of Feniks Polish Film Promotions, who has taken on the role of supporting our North American distribution and promotion.

+ + +

We dedicate this film to all those who survived the ordeal in the Soviet hands, and to your loved ones, whom you left buried in the "inhuman land".

Poland occupied and partitioned between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia

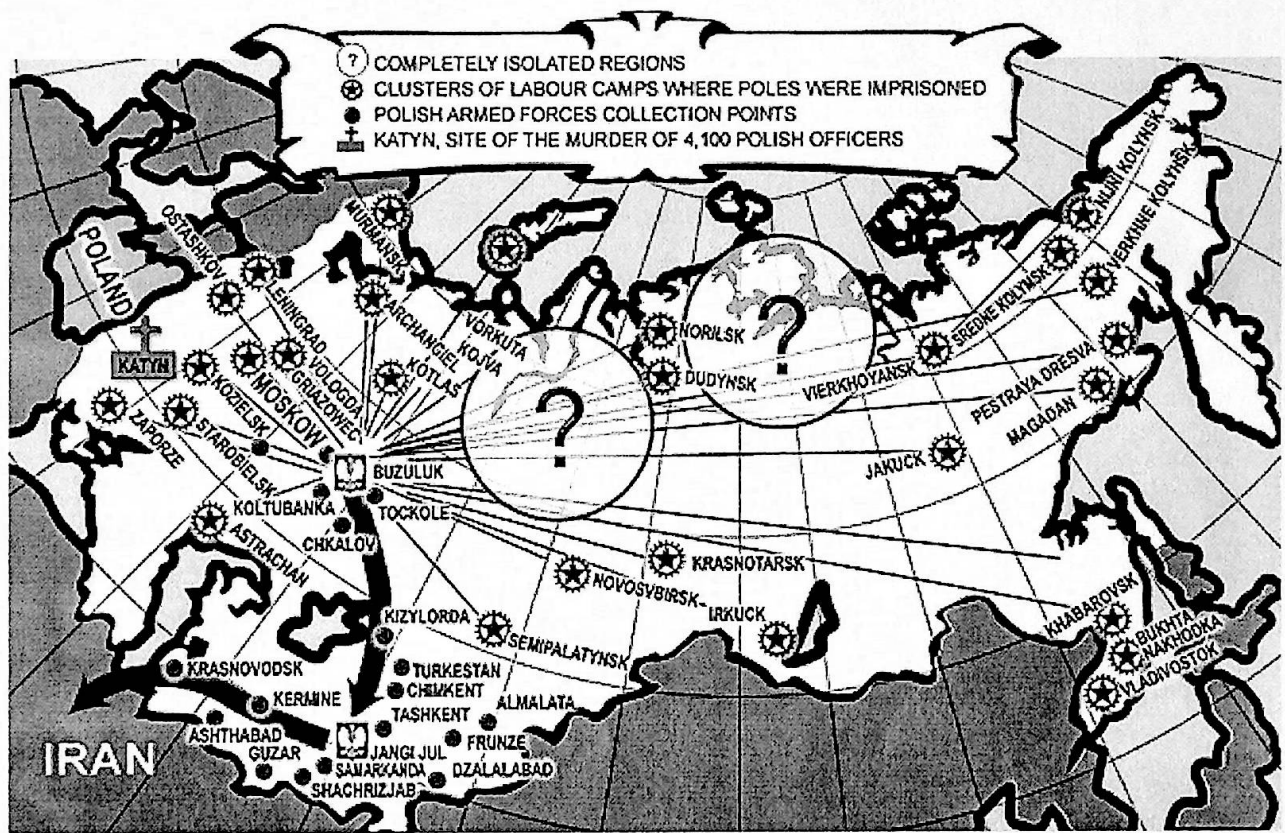


In September 1939, Poland was divided between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

Shortly thereafter, the deportations began from both zones of occupation and the Polish nation was subjected to a campaign that would later be defined as a new crime against humanity called "genocide".

Over 6 million Polish citizens of all religions and ethnicities would perish during the war from the calculated programs of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

The odyssey of a people dispersed across “the inhuman land”



(Map from the book "The Fate of the Poles in the USSR 1939-1989" by Tomasz Piesakowski)

This map is based on the research of General Wladyslaw Anders, who led nearly 120,000 of the deported Poles out of the Soviet Union.

From 1939 to 1941, Polish prisoners of war captured by the Red Army, and deported residents of Soviet-occupied eastern Poland, were dispersed by the Soviet authorities across the foreboding reaches of Soviet Asia.

When the Nazi Germans turned on their Soviet allies in June 1941, the Poles were given an "amnesty" and thousands of soldiers and civilians made their way from their places of confinement across a hellish land to join the gathering Polish Army. This journey south was arguably the harshest experience for the deportees, and hundreds of thousands died on it from disease and starvation.

Although the army gathering in the south tried to care for the civilian refugees, especially children, their rations were cut back by the Soviet authorities to below-subsistence levels. Eventually, Anders managed to convince the Soviets to let the army evacuate to Iran, where they joined their British Allies and continued their preparations for rejoining the battle against the Nazis.

A brief historical synopsis

On September 17, 1939, two weeks after Hitler's attack on Poland, Stalin invaded her from the east. This was the result of a secret protocol of the Molotov Pact, which divided Poland between Germany and Russia - for all intents and purposes forever.

Although the date itself is known to some in the West, most are not aware of the consequences of the invasion. These include not only of the arrest and murder by Stalin's NKVD of 25,000 Polish officers, in what has become known as the 'Katyn massacre' (a crime to which this day no one has been brought to justice!), but also the deportation, in cattle trucks, of 1.7 million Polish civilians - including Jews, Byelorussians, and Ukrainians - for slave labour in Siberia and Northern Kazakhstan.

They worked at back-breaking jobs - in mines, quarries, poverty-stricken collective farms, forests felling trees - regardless of age and standard of health. They lived in lice-infested primitive barracks, stables, and chicken huts. Braving inhuman climatic conditions, they were repeatedly told by their Soviet guards that this was to be their life forever, and that Poland had ceased to exist as a state.

Paradoxically they were saved by Hitler's attack on Russia. Churchill persuaded Stalin to release these Polish prisoners, and allowed them to join the fight against the Nazis. From the remotest corners of Russia, hundreds of thousands of survivors made their way out of the camps. Emaciated and bedraggled by diseases such as malaria, typhus, and dysentery, they left behind a trail of Polish graves. Out of the deported 1.7 million, less than one third (500,000) are known to have survived.

By August 1942, about 74,000 troops and 42,000 of their families crossed the Caspian Sea to Persia, where they were warmly received by the British and American armies. They were fed, clothed and trained as soldiers, after which they went on to fight for their country and for the Allied cause under British command. Despite their valour, however, their fate was no longer in their hands.

After the discovery of the Katyn grave, Stalin claimed to be 'offended' by the Polish insistence on the independent investigation, and broke off diplomatic relations with the Polish government. From that point on, Poland's future lay in the hands of her Western Allies.

This was a delicate matter for the Allies. Overnight, Stalin had turned into a badly needed ally that could not be antagonised. He demanded that 48% of Poland, occupied by the Red Army in an act of aggression, should become part of the Soviet Union. As early as in 1943 in Teheran, Churchill and Roosevelt gave in to his demands - without the knowledge or participation of the Polish Government. The Poles were not even informed about that decision, lest it broke their fighting spirit.

Ignorant of their fate, the free Polish army continued to fight with the Allies, over 48,000 losing their lives on Western battlefields. The Teheran decision was confirmed officially at Yalta, which meant that they became homeless. They scattered all over the world, over 110,000 settling in Britain and others in countries such as Australia, Canada and the USA.

The survivors of this ordeal have never received either compensation or an apology. What is worse, however, is that to this day they have lived in the Allied countries for which they were risking their lives, and which have refused to recognise their experiences and suffering.

This was by no means through their lack of trying. According to Professor Norman Davies, one of a handful of historians who has honestly covered this aspect of the war, all the attempts to tell this story have been actively blocked by government authorities, especially in Britain.

Today these old Polish survivors are passing away - bitter not as much about the war time pragmatism of which they were victims, but about having been consigned to oblivion by the Western democracies they fought to preserve from the Nazi menace.

The Polish refugee families from Siberia spent the rest of the war in temporary camps in Iran, Palestine, Africa, India, New Zealand and Mexico. After the war, most soldiers in the Army of the Polish 2nd Republic settled in England along with the refugee families. However, some of them went on to resettle in Canada, the United States, South America, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia.

What now?

The harshness of the life of these Polish soldiers and refugees before arriving in the West is not fully realized or adequately documented. The stories of survival of those in the group who were deported from Poland, to work in remote labour camps in the Soviet Union, are nothing short of remarkable. And it is important for our history, and the broader record of human endeavour and endurance, that these stories be told.

"A Forgotten Odyssey" has now been shown on the British History Channel, as well as on Polish Television. Now, after the North American tour of producers Jagna Wright and Aneta Naszynska in March 2002, the film has inspired a lot of interest – of the media, of wider audiences, and of the survivors and their families. Please, help promote the film and the untold story it presents.

The following photographs (unless otherwise indicated) are from "The General Langfitt Story", courtesy of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs of Australia.



*Polish children deported to USSR after 1941
(Courtesy of Tadeusz Dobrostanski)*



*Boys 10 to 15 years old enlisted as soldiers (cadets) to get their families fed and allowed to leave the USSR, 1942
(Courtesy of Tadeusz Dobrostanski)*



*Polish Women and Children on the Soviet border with Iran
(Courtesy of Chris Gladun)*



*Forced labour camp in Soviet Siberia.
(From the book "Stalin's Ethnic Cleansing")*



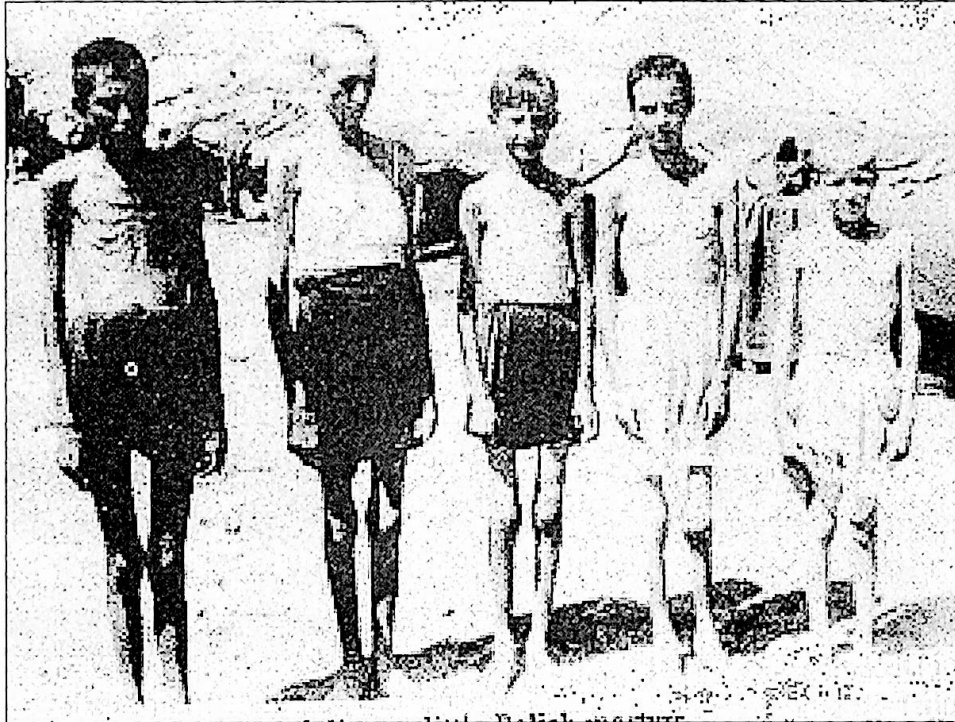
*Polish orphans in Uzbekistan, 1942
(Courtesy of Tadeusz Dobrostanski)*



Quetta, 1942: Polish children evacuated from Aschabad, USSR, to India (Courtesy of Tadeusz Dobrostanski)



Polish Children, Pahlavi, Iran (Persia), about 1942 (Courtesy of Tadeusz Dobrostanski)



*Polish Children, Pahlavi, Iran (Persia), about 1942
(Courtesy of Chris Gladun)*



*The Soviet tanker Zdanov, bound for Iran with Polish refugees
who were glad to leave Soviet persecution
(Courtesy of Chris Gladun)*

Read selected books on "the forgotten odyssey"

Quite a few books have been written on this topic. Here are some respected recent ones. Ask your librarian to help you find more. You may purchase these at bookstores and Internet booksellers like Amazon.com.

Hergt, Klaus. *Exiled to Siberia: A Polish Child's World War II Journey*. Cheboygan, Michigan: Crescent Lake Publishing, 2000.

Krolkowski, Lucjan, OFM Conv. *Stolen Childhood: A Saga of Polish War Children*. Buffalo: Fr. Justyn Rosary Hour, 1983. [new edition: San Jose: Authors Choice, 2001.]

Topolski, Aleksander. *Without Vodka: Adventures in Wartime Russia*. South Royalton VT: Steerforth, 2001.

Davies, Norman. *Heart of Europe: The Past in Poland's Present*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Davies, Norman. *God's Playground: A History of Poland*. 2 vols. NY: Columbia University Press, 1984.

Buy video cassettes of "A Forgotten Odyssey"

Videos are available in English and Polish VHS versions. Prices in the US for purchase by individuals for private home viewing are \$34.98 (including shipping) per video by internet/mail order. Internet on-line ordering by credit card is available at www.aforgottenodyssey.com.

US and Canadian orders can also be placed directly with FENIKS Polish Film Promotion, www.feniks.net/odyssey.htm, e-mail polishfilm@feniks.net, telephone (519) 941-3838 or (416) 433- 5066. Please send credit card information with your order, or enclose a personal check to FENIKS, and mail to 20927 Main Street, Orangeville ON L9W 2Y9 Canada or fax to (519) 940-3274.

International orders, including for PAL format videos for non-North American locations, can be placed directly with Lest We Forget Productions, e-mail Lestweforgetprods@yahoo.co.uk, PO Box 32555, London W3 7XF England; fax 44 208 742 9086, telephone 44 208 742 9084. See www.aforgottenodyssey.com for international pricing and ordering information.

Purchases (with included public performance rights) by school or public libraries, colleges, universities, other institutions and non-profit community organizations are by special arrangement, with details available from Lest We Forget Productions Limited or at <http://www.aforgottenodyssey.com/>.

Join the Kresy-Siberia internet discussion group

If you are interested in "research, remembrance and recognition" of this odyssey, please join the internet discussion group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Kresy-Siberia>