

# Interrogating Memories of Salvation: ‘Stalin’s Poles’ in India and Africa, 1942–50

Paul Sendziuk and Sophie Howe

## Abstract:

Following their deportation and exile in the USSR during World War Two, thousands of Poles spent up to eight years in refugee settlements in India and Africa before some secured migration to Australia. Sixteen members of this group were interviewed by the authors and recounted their time in these settlements in very positive terms. This article suggests why so many remembered finding ‘salvation’ in Africa and India, when other forms of evidence point to their experiences being more difficult. It highlights the significance of broaching topics in a particular order during an interview, the age and ‘class’ of the interviewee at the time of the events being recalled and at the time of interview, the distorting effects of ‘collective’ memory and the use of photographs to prompt memories and tell stories.

## Introduction

Australia’s acceptance of 170,000 displaced persons (DPs) after World War II significantly bolstered Australia’s population and was vital for the reconstruction of the nation’s economy. The history of this migration scheme, and the challenges posed to and by the new arrivals, has been well documented by historians such as Egon Kunz, Andrew Markus and Nonja Peters, and, more recently, Ruth Balint, Jayne Persian, and Alexandra Dellios.<sup>1</sup> These histories largely focus on those who suffered or fled from Nazi aggression and who were housed in European DP camps at the end of the war before being selected to come to Australia. Much less is known about those who suffered occupation and deportation by Soviet forces, and who then found salvation in DP camps located outside of Europe.<sup>2</sup> Addressing this relative neglect, we have elsewhere written about the fate of tens of thousands of Polish citizens who were deported to the Soviet Union during the war and spent up to eight years in DP settlements in the Middle East, India and Africa before arriving in Australia in 1950.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, we drew upon sixteen oral interviews that one of us conducted with survivors of this group in 2009 and 2010, as well oral histories collected by Maryon Allbrook and Helen Cattalini over two decades ago.<sup>4</sup>

The stories told by our interviewees are remarkably consistent and present the British-administered Indian and African camps in a very favourable light. These camps seem to have provided calming and therapeutic environments, which provided the foundation for the Poles to more easily adapt to life in Australia and prosper. Most of our interviewees recalled food in the camps being plentiful and nutritious, and clothing and accommodation adequate, enabling the Poles to arrive in Australia in robust health. Their many years spent in the camps encouraged the formation of strong communal bonds and social and class hierarchies, so it is not surprising that, once in Australia, many of ‘Stalin’s Poles’ married one another and founded Polish organisations to maintain these friendships and replicate these hierarchies. Catholic church services and after-school Scouts and Girl Guides groups were cultivated in the Indian and African camps to impart the benefits of moral and civic virtue, hard work and faith in Christ to a disproportionately large number of fatherless children. Children also experienced for the first time democratic governance and the consistent application of the rule of law. It was the disciplinary function of these institutions and form of governance that, our informants suggest, enabled the youngest of the Polish exiles to achieve success at school and work once in Australia.<sup>5</sup> In short, the Poles’ stories suggest it was their pre-arrival experiences that substantially determined their ability to cope and adapt to their new home in Australia.

Putting aside the question of whether life in Australia was really as prosperous for the majority of Poles as suggested by the sample that we interviewed, in this article we turn our attention to their recollections of salvation in India and Africa. For if their memories of their time in India and Africa are faulty or distorted, the perceived causal link between their immediate pre-arrival experiences and their successful settlement in Australia becomes more tenuous. We have good reason to believe what they told us. The Poles’ recollections are remarkably consistent and accord with the few available written sources pertaining to the period and places in question.<sup>6</sup> But, as we shall discuss, there are numerous factors that influence the way in which memories are made, shared and narrated that can result

in a consistent but inaccurate story to emerge. And the written sources used to test the veracity of the oral testimony are not necessarily objective records, having mostly been composed many years after the Poles were in India and Africa and thus themselves the product of memory and the imperfect art of story-telling. There is also just enough evidence – the odd statement made during an interview pointing to hardship, and some of the physical remnants of the former Indian and African camps – to call into question the otherwise overwhelmingly positive portrayal of life in the camps. In this article, then, we interrogate the Poles' memories of salvation and how those memories were formed, and consider the process by which those memories came to constitute the history of the Polish settlements in India and Africa between 1942 and 1950.

## Exile

To make sense of the Poles' recollections, we must first understand how they came to be in India and Africa. This part of the story begins on 17 September 1939, when eastern Poland was invaded by units of the Red Army that seized control of territory occupied by 13.5 million Polish citizens.<sup>7</sup> Private and state property were confiscated, and arrests, expulsions and executions became common. Some 200,000 army personnel and reservists were interned and nearly 22,000 Polish citizens, many of them army and reservist officers, were executed by the NKVD and buried in the Katyn forest and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> The Soviets compiled a list of those most capable of resisting, and in the middle of a freezing night on 10 February 1940 their deportation began. A total of four waves of deportations saw *at least* 320,000 Polish citizens (but possibly hundreds of thousands more) exiled to Siberia and other parts of the Soviet Union to work in labour camps and collective farms.<sup>9</sup> Crammed into railroad cattle wagons with few provisions, to undertake journeys that lasted up to four weeks, thousands died before they reached their destination.<sup>10</sup>

When Russia was attacked by Germany, the prospects of those who had survived deportation and exile in the Soviet Union seemingly improved. In an uneasy alliance with the Polish government-in-exile, Stalin agreed to free the surviving Polish citizens and allowed the formation of a Polish Army on Soviet soil. The released Poles undertook an arduous journey through the Soviet Union to join the Polish troops amassing thousands of miles away in southern Uzbekistan, but without adequate transportation, food, or communal support, many perished during the attempt. More died upon arrival as disease swept through the army settlements. It is estimated that 10 per cent of the 200,000 Polish citizens who gathered in the central Soviet republics between December 1941 and June 1942 died of typhus alone.<sup>11</sup> During this time, many children were separated from their mothers as they were forced to get on and off trains to beg for food or

steal, or because severely ill children needed to be left behind in orphanages and hospitals so that the rest of their families could follow Polish army units south.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in the European spring and summer of 1942, approximately 74,935 formerly exiled army personnel and 38,120 Polish civilians were permitted to leave the Soviet Union and cross the Caspian Sea to reach Pahlavi in Persia (now known as Iran).<sup>13</sup> At least a further 2650 Poles travelled overland to Mashhad, and then to other locations in Persia and India.<sup>14</sup> These civilians constituted just a fraction of those deported from Poland, with the remainder either dead or left stranded in Soviet territory, as further departures were prohibited by Soviet authorities.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the Poles spent only a few months in Persia. The soldiers and cadets departed for training in Iraq and Palestine, taking with them 6,100 female civilians who joined the Women's Auxiliary Service.<sup>16</sup> Several thousand boys and girls were sent to schools in Lebanon and Palestine.<sup>17</sup> Seven hundred and thirty-three orphaned children and 102 of their carers sailed to New Zealand,<sup>18</sup> and two transports containing 1,435 Poles left for Mexico via Karachi.<sup>19</sup> Greater numbers, some 5,000 of the exiled Polish civilians, were transferred to British-administered camps in India, the biggest of which was Valivade, established near the city of Kolhapur in the first half of 1943. They remained there until 1947, when India secured Independence from Britain and the camps were closed. The majority of the 'Indian' Poles, about 3,500, then secured resettlement in England and Canada (and twenty were selected to come to Australia<sup>20</sup>). The remainder were sent to Africa to join the 18,000 other Polish refugees who had been transferred there from Persia in late 1942 and 1943.<sup>21</sup>

Initially, the camps in India and Africa had their expenses paid by the colonial governments, who invoiced the exiled Polish Government in London for reimbursement.<sup>22</sup> This arrangement continued until July 1945 when a pro-Soviet Communist Government was installed in Poland, which declined to accept financial responsibility for its citizens abroad who refused to return to Communist Poland. Thus British colonial authorities became solely responsible for the Polish camps in India and Africa, resulting in lower expenditure and the replacement of Valivade's Polish commandant with a British officer. Later, from August 1946 until the Poles' departure from India and Africa, the Polish settlements were supported by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and its successor, the International Refugee Organisation (IRO).<sup>23</sup>

## Memories of India

Our interviewees vividly recalled the organisation of the camps and their physical layouts. Residents of the Valivade camp lived in stone barracks that were

divided into family apartments, usually consisting of two rooms and a small kitchen. Boguslaw Trella recalled that the accommodation offered privacy and autonomy:

each family had its own apartment, [we] didn't have to share anything ... it was quite a pleasant feeling because you could arrange our little place the way we wanted to. We would put those coloured matting on the floor and you could hang up things all on the wall. It was home, really.<sup>24</sup>

The Poles received an allowance that they used to purchase supplies to prepare their own meals. Trella, Halina Juszczyk and Tadeusz Dobrostanski each recall there was 'plenty' to eat.<sup>25</sup> Some adults were able to find paid employment to supplement their allowance. Urszula Paszkowska remembers what a 'good life' this was, at least in a material sense:

As mother was working as a teacher her salary doubled our income so it was quite adequate for our needs. There was a good supply of shops in the centre of the settlement, there were markets just outside where vegetables could be bought and we were able to travel to Kolhapur to get anything else that wasn't available. I was involved in the Girl Guide movement and we had some lovely camps and excursions.<sup>26</sup>

As the 'small allowance' was just enough 'for food and clothes', but not for leisure activities such as the cinema or the Scouts' camp, life was harder for those without additional income.<sup>27</sup>

Valivade functioned democratically, with a representative from each 'block' of barracks sitting on one of five councils. These councils liaised with the commandant (a Pole), who dealt with the British authorities and was ultimately responsible for the camp's administration. Within the camp community, a church, a hospital, an orphanage, numerous community centres, a theatre, a regular newspaper and a canteen and restaurant were established. As Bogdan Harbuz recalled:

We could listen to the BBC radio programs which were broadcast in Polish in one of the five regional library-cultural centres where young people could also play chess, cards, or other games. There were also choirs and the central administration would organise large concerts and plays for the whole camp. We also had a cinema run by an Indian. It was like a little town of its own. Five thousand Polish people. A little Poland in India.<sup>28</sup>

Children in Valivade were educated by three kindergartens, four elementary schools, a secondary school, and a trade school.<sup>29</sup> Two thousand five hundred children attended these Polish Schools which followed

teaching programs from pre-war Poland.<sup>30</sup> Students were taught in Polish. However after 1945, English became a part of the syllabus when it became apparent that a return to Poland was unlikely. This was beneficial for the children who later emigrated to Australia. Trella recalls that corporal punishment, while permitted, was never used by the teachers to maintain discipline. Dobrostanski considered the education to be 'a very high standard'.<sup>31</sup>

As in the other Polish camps in India and Africa, Scouting and Girl Guides, Catholic Mass and team sports became a feature of the children's daily lives. These activities, along with male scout leaders and priests, instilled discipline and respect within the disproportionately large number of fatherless children. As Dobrostanski and his fellow deportees recall, reforming these children was an immense challenge. They had survived the Soviet Union by begging, lying, stealing food, and pick-pocketing corpses left on railroad platforms. In India and Africa, they learnt patience, industry and team work, and how to tell right from wrong.<sup>32</sup>

## Memories of Africa

The Poles who went to Africa from Persia were settled in 23 different camps in the British territories of Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika (Tanzania), Northern and Southern Rhodesia, and South Africa. Women outnumbered men by a ratio of 2:1; and children and adolescent girls outnumbered women by a similar ratio.<sup>33</sup> The largest camps were Tengeru in Tanganyika and Koja in Uganda. Peak population in these camps reached about 5,000 and 4,000 people respectively. Most of the Poles spent time in multiple camps, moving to one of the largest camps when their smaller settlement was liquidated. Of the Poles who ultimately came to Australia, nearly all ended up in either Koja or Tengeru, where an Australian immigration selection team visited in November and December 1949. By this time, some Poles had spent seven years in Tengeru and were fully enmeshed in the community that was established there.

The camps were administered by British commandants, but the daily affairs of the camps were largely determined by a committee of Polish elders. As in India, Polish schools, scout groups, churches, orchestras, libraries, hospitals, civic centres, workshops and service cooperatives were established and Polish culture prospered. African radio stations ran Polish-language programs, and there was a Polish press.<sup>34</sup>

The Poles who had come from Valivade remember being disappointed by the conditions they found at the very remote Koja settlement in Uganda. 'After the luxury of India', remembers Bogdan Harbuz, the camp 'looked rather primitive to us'. The Poles were now given provisions instead of money: 'some rice, flour, a bit of meat, salt, sugar, tea and coffee once a

week'. Many planted their own vegetable gardens to supplement their diet. 'We felt very dependent on UNRRA for everything, including our clothing', recalled Harbuz.<sup>35</sup> Some of our interviewees were disappointed by the taste and quantity of the food – Zenon Zebrowski and his two sisters, Teresa and Zofia, each made disparaging comments about this – while others recalled it was acceptable.<sup>36</sup>

The Poles in Africa were not obliged to work for their rations or, depending where they were, the meals that were provided for them in large dining halls. Owing to their greater isolation there were fewer opportunities for them to undertake paid work in the local economy than was the case in India. In this respect, they had fewer opportunities to acquire skills that might have been useful in Australia. Women spent a fair bit of time trying to keep their thatched roof and mat floor bungalows clean, tending to family members suffering from malaria, and chasing snakes and plagues of ants and insects from their dwellings. They were also involved in camp administration and 'intellectual work', such as teaching. The 'manual labour' was performed by local Africans, who, the Poles remember, were treated poorly by the British.<sup>37</sup>

Many of the African camps were in exotic and beautiful locations. Koja in Uganda bordered Lake Victoria. Harbuz recalls 'the big lake, the beautiful jungle, the animals, the fruit of the jungle, the Africans. To me it was an adventure.'<sup>38</sup> Budding photographer Wojciech Marten's testimony and pictures record sailing on the lake and rambunctious adventures in Koja and its surrounds (see Figures 1 and 2).<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Patro remembers that girls were kept on a tighter rein, though she and her friends still found themselves stranded up a tree on the shores of Lake Victoria as a pod of hippopotami, one of the most dangerous creatures in Africa, wallowed below.<sup>40</sup> At the time, children were oblivious to their mothers' fretting when they absconded to the jungle or savannah, where they



Sailing Lake Victoria that bordered Koja Camp, Uganda. Photograph courtesy of Wojciech Marten.

encountered boa constrictors, giraffes and elephants. Three of our interviewees recalled, fleetingly, one of the Polish children being eaten by a crocodile, and almost all suffered from malaria, but they did not dwell on these experiences.<sup>41</sup>

These, then, are stories of salvation and restoration, of developing confidence and capabilities, and of little Polish 'villages' run according to Catholic and democratic values and the rule of law. As Elizabeth Patro explained, it was as if the Poles had ascended from Hell into Heaven.<sup>42</sup> But physical evidence that remains at the sites of some of the former camps suggests a different story that was barely acknowledged by our interviewees. In 2007 one of us visited the site of the former Tengeru camp in Tanzania. Little remained of the camp; some of the buildings became part of an agricultural college that was still in use. Hidden from view down a winding path lay a gated cemetery of Polish graves, still tended by a Polish Catholic priest who lived in the area. It contained 148 crosses and headstones, many marking the deaths of children. A similar cemetery exists near the former Koja camp in Uganda, where there are more than 100 graves. The cemeteries are stark reminders that Africa was not then a particularly safe place for Europeans, especially those who had histories of malnourishment and compromised immunity. Malaria and other tropical diseases were rife in most parts of Africa where the camps were located. There were outbreaks of influenza and typhus, and waterborne parasites were an ever-present threat, not to mention the jungle and savannah creatures.

Moreover, one man, Bogdan Harbuz, a former resident of the Valivade and Koja camps who was interviewed



Wojciech 'Tex' Marten enjoys the jungle surrounding Koja Camp, Uganda. Photograph courtesy of Wojciech Marten.

for an oral history project in the mid-1990s, had a different recollection to those that were offered to me. He told oral historians Maryon Allbrook and Helen Cattalini:

I remember hunger again, and discipline was very strict. We kids thought that no-one cared about us any more. We were asked to serve at the table and we saw the difference in food between the groups of older people who were looking after us and what we were getting. We used to go to the rubbish bins behind the kitchen to get some things out of it to eat. The Commandant was always dressed in an army officer's uniform, with a baton that quite often used to land on somebody's backside. He was very strict with us. That is the way I remember it.<sup>43</sup>

The nature and tone of this remark is at odds with the joy and enthusiasm expressed by our interviewees. What might have led them to focus on different things, and recount their experiences in India and Africa in a much more positive manner? Here we get the heart of methodological and theoretical matters concerning the recruitment and interview of those willing to share their memories, and the tricks of memory itself.

The stories told by our interviewees need to be placed in the context of the history of their lives until this point. In comparison to what happened to the Poles during the war and in the Soviet Union before they arrived in the camps, India and Africa *were* like Heaven. Not a single one of them failed to shed tears as they remembered the terror of the night their family was deported – dogs barking and soldiers pointing guns at hysterical family members in bedclothes – or when recounting riding with corpses aboard the freezing, stinking cattle wagons to exile in the Soviet Union. One recalled her father shooting her brother and then himself to avoid capture by Russian troops.<sup>44</sup> Life in Soviet work camps and 'special settlements' was hard, and the Poles' release and journey southward to escape the Soviet Union even more perilous. Fathers were dead or missing, mothers became separated from their children, and all were forced to beg or steal or trade precious items – even buttons from blouses – to escape starvation. The physical condition of the Poles upon arrival in Pahlavi in Persia is telling (see Figure 3). When the Soviet Union was so dark, it is almost inevitable that Africa and India would shine bright. The tone and content of their testimony might have been different had we questioned our interviewees only about the DP settlements in India and Africa, rather than first asking them to recall the horror of deportation and the struggle for survival in the Soviet Union. What is told at a particular point in an oral history interview is dependent, to an extent, on what has just been said.

We can be certain that if we had interviewed the mothers of the children in the DP camps, rather than



Polish children, Pahlavi, Persia (Iran), 1942. Photograph courtesy of Tadeusz Dobrostanski.

the grown-up version of the children, we would have heard different stories, or the emphasis placed on different things. All of our interviewees were between 12 and 20 years of age by the time they left Africa in 1950, and aged between 72 and 79 years when they spoke to us. Their parents were no longer alive to be interviewed. While their children sat in school learning from donated books, played soccer, swam in the lake, and rambled in the savannah or jungle, the mothers mourned the deaths of their husbands and their children who had not survived the exodus from the Soviet Union, or fretted for their husbands who were in the army or in hiding. It was they who watched helplessly as their children wrestled with malaria (having just seen family members and other children succumb to disease in Russia and Uzbekistan), who frantically fought plagues of ants and insects, and who worried that the lake, snakes or other animals would consume their children. Elizabeth Patro laughed as she recalled being stranded with her classmates in a tree for a day and half the night after being chased by a hippo, which came to rest with her young underneath the branches. But she could admit that her mother was terrified by this incident. India and Africa would not have felt like a safe place for Polish mothers, and while some recovered their equilibrium and began the ascent, the currents of Hell surged and tugged at their feet.

The age of our interviewees during their stay in India and Africa and then at the time of interview raises a further issue. As Jay Mechling reminds us, an adult reflecting in the present about their childhood "will be perceiving and interpreting that childhood through her adult, learned categories – from adult notions of propriety to the special vocabularies of popularized psychology".<sup>45</sup> Historians Katie Wright and Julie McLeod have also shown how such memories can be influenced by the powerful cultural narratives of childhood given widespread expression in popular culture, such as the notion of childhood being the 'best days of your life'.<sup>46</sup> Carla Pascoe's interviews with men and women who grew up in 1950s Australia appear to support this, with her respondents recollecting their post-war childhoods as safe and free in contrast to the

dangers and pressures surrounding the contemporary experience of growing up.<sup>47</sup> Our interviewees were not necessarily describing the best days of their lives, nor were all strictly ‘children’ during their time in India and Africa, but they are all, at least to a degree, likely to be influenced by a pervading and nostalgic cultural narrative concerning the freedom and joy of youth.

Our sample of interviewees was limited in another way, which likely influenced the testimony we collected. Nearly all had enjoyed relatively successful and prosperous lives in Australia, either taking advantage of secondary and tertiary education opportunities (being too young upon arrival to be bound by a two-year manual work contract<sup>48</sup>) or working their way through a variety of occupations before becoming small business owners or entering the professions. Most had assumed or been elected to prominent positions in Polish community organisations – a measure of both the esteem in which they were held by their community and their apparent respectability. It was either through these organisations, or by being recommended by other members of the Polish-Australian community, that they came to our attention or our project caught theirs. We thus largely interviewed successful and upstanding members of the Polish-Australian community, and it is not surprising that, in being asked to reflect on how they came to be in their current position, they should look favourably upon a time and place that they believed instilled the virtues and values that enabled them to prosper once in Australia. This view – that humans habitually compose their memories to suit or validate their present-day identities – is maintained by scholars such as Alistair Thomson, John R. Gillis, Christin Quirk, Brian F. Havel, Valerie Bourke, and Susan Engel,<sup>49</sup> as well as psychological studies.<sup>50</sup> Had we been able to recruit and interview more people who had endured difficult lives in Australia, who were perhaps more attuned to poverty and social inequality, we might have heard more stories aligned with Bogdan Harbus’s recollection of hunger, inequity, and corporal punishment in the DP camps, and/or which blamed the organisation of the camps for failing to adequately prepare them for life in Australia.<sup>51</sup>

While all of the interview participants would describe themselves now as proud Australians, and all expressed gratitude for the ‘generosity’ of the Australian government and people for accepting them in 1950s, they also exhibited deep affection for the country from which their families were so brutally removed. They had not wanted to be repatriated to Poland after the war because of the communist take-over and, in many cases, because the country’s borders had been redrawn so that their homes were now situated in Ukraine. But they were proud of the country that existed prior to the war, and especially the Polish government, betrayed and forced into exile in London when the country was invaded and partitioned. Most of our interviewees

specifically remarked that it was the exiled government, using gold smuggled out of Poland, that provided for their welfare in India and Africa (although, in truth, private charity and loans from the British government – which could never be repaid – sustained the system). To therefore criticise the organisation of the camps in India and Africa, and the activities and provisions within, would be to criticise the Polish government-in-exile and what it stood for: beloved pre-war Poland.

Beyond these issues is the matter of memory. Scholarship concerning the constitution of memory, and one’s ability to accurately recall and narrate memories of past events, has proliferated in the past three decades, inspiring the publication of many books and the creation of academic journals devoted to these subjects. This field of research is multidisciplinary, drawing on the insights of historians, literary theorists, psychologists and neuroscientists, among others.<sup>52</sup> We now understand that, in the words of Alessandro Portelli, ‘memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings’;<sup>53</sup> it is reconstructive and influenced by one’s cultural and gender identity,<sup>54</sup> rather than a flawless recording of what was witnessed or experienced in the past. As oral historian Mary Chamberlain explains:

We cannot look, imagine, remember, describe, or recount without first having the imaginative structures that enable this... What is remembered, when, and why is molded by the culture in which [people] live, the language at their disposal, and the conventions and genre appropriate to the occasion.<sup>55</sup>

We also know that one’s experience of trauma impacts on memory,<sup>56</sup> as does the passage of time, in ways that are unpredictable and unique to each individual, and that memories are prone to adapt and modify upon each telling. Indeed, as Steven Rose asserts, ‘each act of recall is itself a new experience. Reactivated memories are subtly changed each time we recall them’.<sup>57</sup>

However, it is the scholarship pertaining to the interplay between ‘collective memory’ and individual memory that is most relevant to our particular study. Sociologist Maurice Halbwach pioneered this line of thinking. He argued that in order for social groups to maintain an ‘affective community’, individuals tended to remember and retell stories in ways that were in harmony with the memories of others.<sup>58</sup> The most durable memories then tended to be those held by the greatest number. Refining this argument, Alistair Thompson and Graham Dawson have shown how individuals, desiring or seeking acceptance within a social group (be this a family, a migrant cohort or the nation as a whole), will consciously or subconsciously recollect past events in a way that conforms to particular narratives or scripts sanctioned by the group.<sup>59</sup> This tendency is arguably strongest when the group is

clearly defined by its members sharing very similar and emotional experiences, and meeting regularly to retell or commemorate events, as in the case of the former Poles that we interviewed. At the time of interview, each defined themselves as a ‘Siberian survivor’ and enjoyed participating in regular gatherings of Kresy-Siberia groups/associations in Perth and Melbourne. The formation and maintenance of their identity relies upon them telling their stories over-and-over again, to each other and to others, and reciting them in a similar way that confirms their legitimate place within the group. Memories of India and Africa are shared, with the ever-present risk of one’s own recollection being buried beneath the weight of testimony of the majority of others, or appropriating the stories of others as one’s own. Through this process, differences in the interpretation of events are diminished or resolved entirely.

The use of photographs, such as the ones featured in this article, as aids to recall the past at Polish community gatherings and commemorations exacerbates this process. The photographs – often belonging to someone else – viewed by and shared among the group become triggers for one’s own memory and storytelling. ‘In doing so’, Thomson maintains, ‘they might filter memory selectively through the images that were created and that have survived’.<sup>60</sup> More often than not, photographs are taken to capture happy and harmonious occasions, their subjects smiling, which in this case has contributed to the romanticised portrayal of the Indian and African camps and their surrounds.

Writing about instances when individual soldier memories fail to conform to the constructed mythology concerning ‘ANZAC heroes’, Thomson reminds us that memories that do not fit the dominant narrative are ‘risky and painful’.<sup>61</sup> And so it has proven for at least one of the former Polish displaced persons who was critical of the Poles’ treatment in India and Africa when he was interviewed by Allbrook and Cattalini in the 1990s. We were told by one of our interviewees 15 years later that this fellow had been ‘ex-communicated’ from the group for the views he had expressed.<sup>62</sup> A friendship forged during traumatic experiences of deportation, forced labour and exile – that was strong enough to withstand hunger, disease and death – was fractured due to a disagreement about how one aspect of the past was remembered. In probing the former Poles’ memories of India and Africa, we do not seek to cause a similar rupture in the group, nor wish to cause offence. We believe that our interviewees recalled their experiences to the best of their ability, and faithfully told us what they remembered. We certainly do not discount their memories. Despite our reservations expressed above, the consistency of the former Poles’ testimony and its alignment with written sources cannot be ignored. Rather, our aim has been to illuminate how and why memories might be distorted and narratives

bent, and to consider the process by which particular stories become dominant, so that we might be less quick to dismiss divergent views of the past.

**This article has been peer reviewed.**

## Endnotes

- 1 Egon Kunz, *Displaced Persons: Calwell’s New Australians*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1988; Andrew Markus, ‘Labour and Immigration 1946-9: The Displaced Persons Programme’, *Labour History*, vol. 47, 1984, pp. 73–90; Nonja Peters, *Milk and Honey – but No Gold: Postwar Migration to Western Australia, 1945-1965*, UWA Press, Perth, 2001; Ruth Balint, ‘Industry and Sunshine: Australia as Home in the Displaced Persons’ Camps of Postwar Europe’, *History Australia*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2014, pp. 102–27; Jayne Persian, *Beautiful Balts: From Displaced Persons to New Australians*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2017; Alexandra Dellios, *Histories of Controversy: Bonegilla Migrant Centre*, Melbourne University Publishing, Melbourne, 2017. See also, for example, Catherine Panich, *Sanctuary? Remembering Postwar Immigration*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988; Klaus Neumann, *Across the Seas: Australia’s Response to Refugees - A History*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2015; and various entries in James Jupp (ed.), *The Australian People: An Encyclopedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origins*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001.
- 2 Works that examine the temporary settlement outside of Europe of Polish DPs (who did not necessarily come to Australia) include Anuradha Bhattacharjee, *The Second Homeland: Polish Refugees in India*, Sage, New Delhi, 2013; Lynne Taylor, *Polish Orphans of Tengeru: The Dramatic Story of Their Long Journey to Canada 1941-49*, Dundurn Press, Toronto, 2009; and Atina Grossmann, ‘Jewish Refugees in Soviet Central Asia, Iran, and India: Lost Memories of Displacement, Trauma, and Rescue’, in Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Atina Grossmann (eds), *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2017, pp. 185–218. More recent work has focused on the experiences of European Jews who either fled to the Soviet Union to evade capture by the Nazis, or were deported to the Soviet Union from Poland, and eventually found refuge in China before coming to Australia. See Antonia Finnane, *Far from Where? Jewish Journeys to Shanghai*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1999; Klaus Neumann, ‘The Admission of European Refugees from East and South Asia in 1947: Antecedents of Australia’s International Refugee Organization Mass Resettlement Scheme’, *History Australia*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2015, pp. 62–79; Ruth Balint, ‘Before Australia: Historicising Russian Migration via China after World War II’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2019, pp. 3–20; Jayne Persian, ‘“The Dirty Vat”: European Migration to Australia from Shanghai, 1946–47’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2019, pp. 21–40.
- 3 Paul Sendziuk, ‘Forgotten People and Places: “Stalin’s Poles” in Persia, India and Africa, 1942–50’, *History Australia*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2015, pp. 41–61.
- 4 Full-length audio recordings as well as ‘timed’ summaries of the interviews are available from the National Library of Australia’s website: ‘Stalin’s Poles’ Oral History Project, interviews conducted by Paul Sendziuk, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4767196>. Also see Allbrook and Cattalini, *The General Langfitt Story: Polish Refugees Recount their Experiences of*

- Exile, Dispersal and Resettlement*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1995.
- 5 This view was most clearly expressed by Janusz Smenda (National Library of Australia [henceforth NLA], TRC 6175/6), George Mazak (NLA, TRC 6175/2) and Tadeusz Dobrostanski (NLA, TRC 6175/13). Similar claims have been made by and about 'Stalin's Poles' who settled in other countries. See various testimonies in Adam Manterys (ed.), *New Zealand's First Refugees: Pahiatua's Polish Children*, Polish Children's Reunion Committee, Wellington, 2008; and Anne Applebaum, 'The Children of Pahiatua', *Slate*, 17 May 2013, accessed 28 September 2014, [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the\\_hive/2013/05/pahiatua\\_s\\_polish\\_world\\_war\\_ii\\_refugees\\_a\\_group\\_of\\_young\\_poles\\_made\\_a\\_new.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_hive/2013/05/pahiatua_s_polish_world_war_ii_refugees_a_group_of_young_poles_made_a_new.html)
  - 6 This literature mainly consists of autobiographical accounts, some of them unpublished. See, for example, Alicia A. Zarzycki and Stefania Buczak-Zarzycka, *Kwaheri Africa: A Polish Experience 1929-1950, from Deportation to Freedom*, self-published, Perth, 1986; Ryszard Wiland, *Mother Don't Cry*, Australian Booksellers Association, Melbourne, 2007; Tadeusz Piotrowski (ed.), *The Polish Deportees of World War II: Recollections of Removal to the Soviet Union and Dispersal Throughout the World*, McFarland & Company, London, 2004; Teresa Glazer, et al. (eds), *Poles in India 1942-1948*, Association of the Poles in India, London, 2009. For more scholarly accounts, see Bhattacharjee, *The Second Homeland*, and Taylor, *Polish Orphans of Tengeru*.
  - 7 Daniel Boćkowski, *Czas nadziei. Obywatele Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w ZSRR i opieka nad nimi placówek polskich w latach 1940-1943*, Wydawnictwo NERITON, Instytut Historii PAN, Warszawa, 1999, p. 17. This estimate is based on pre-1939 census data and does not include the large number of people who fled into Poland's eastern territory following Germany's invasion of the west.
  - 8 Czesław Brzoza and Andrzej Leon Sowa, *Historia Polski, 1918-1945*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 2009, pp. 574-5.
  - 9 This figure is derived from NKVD documents that became accessible to researchers in the early 1990s. Many survivors of the deportations believe that these records are incomplete because their names do not appear on the lists of deportees and because the number of deportees contrasts with much higher estimates produced by eyewitnesses during the war. Some historians continue to believe that over one million Poles were deported, but consensus suggests the actual number lies between 320,000 and 400,000. For a brief discussion of the disagreement between historians on this point, see Katherine R. Jolluck, "'You Can't Even Call Them Women': Poles and 'Others' in Soviet Exile during the Second World War", *Contemporary European History*, vol. 10, no.3, 2001, p. 465, fn. 4.
  - 10 Many of our interviewees recalled the deprivations suffered during the journey to Soviet exile in gruesome detail. See, for example, Elizabeth Patro, NLA, TRC 6175/3; Janusz Smenda, NLA, TRC 6175/6; Tadeusz Dobrostanski, NLA, TRC 6175/13; Halina Juszczak, NLA, TRC 6175/14; Bogusław Trella, NLA, TRC 6175/15.
  - 11 Stanisław Ciesielski, Wojciech Materski and Andrzej Paczkowski, *Represje sowieckie wobec Polaków i obywateli polskich*, Ośrodek Karta, Warszawa, 2002, pp. 20-1.
  - 12 Most of our interviewees recalled such instances. See, for example, Elizabeth Patro, NLA, TRC 6175/3; Tadeusz Dobrostanski, NLA, TRC 6175/13; and Kazimierz Sosnowski, who was one of the children separated from their mothers, NLA, TRC 6175/10.
  - 13 These figures are quoted in reports written by Lt. Col. Alexander Ross, the Officer in Charge of the British Base Evacuation Staff who oversaw the evacuations and the establishment of the refugee settlements in Iran. See 'Report on Evacuation of Poles from Pahlavi, 25th March - 25th April 1942', 3 June 1942, National Archives (UK), FO 371/31077, and 'Evacuation of Polish Citizens from Krasnovodsk - Report on the Refugee Camps', National Archives (UK), WO 204/8711.
  - 14 Leszek Beldowski, 'How and Why Several Thousand Poles Came to India', in Teresa Glazer, et al. (eds), *Poles in India 1942-1948*, Association of the Poles in India, London, 2009, p. 15.
  - 15 The civilian evacuees were selected by Polish and Russian authorities, who, for different reasons, discriminated against Polish Jews and those who were considered to be Belarusian or Ukrainian. Hence ethnic Poles constituted the overwhelming majority of evacuees and, following the departure of most of the evacuated Polish Jews to Palestine, constituted approximately 97 per cent of those who were eventually selected by migration officials to settle in Australia. See Anita J. Prazmowska, *Britain and Poland, 1939-1943: The Betrayed Ally*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 132-3; and, for the Australian selection, Allbrook and Cattalini, pp. 126-7.
  - 16 Beldowski, 'How and Why', p. 15.
  - 17 Beldowski, 'How and Why', p. 15; Tadeusz Piotrowski, 'Introduction', in Piotrowski (ed.), *The Polish Deportees of World War II: Recollections of Removal to the Soviet Union and Dispersal Throughout the World*, McFarland & Company, London, 2004, pp. 10-11. For the transfer of the Polish Jews, who were mainly children, see Henryk Grynberg, *Children of Zion*, trans. Jacqueline Mitchell, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill, 1998; and 'Tehran Children', *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, accessed 3 May 2018, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/article/tehran-children>
  - 18 See Manterys (ed.), *New Zealand's First Refugees*; and Krystyna Skwarko, *The Invited: The Story of 733 Polish Children Who Grew Up in New Zealand*, Millwood Press, Wellington, 1974.
  - 19 See Richard C. Lukas, 'Polish Refugees in Mexico: An Historical Footnote', *The Polish Review*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1977, pp. 73-5; Piotr Piwowarczyk, 'Hacienda Santa Rosa: A Polish Refuge in Mexico', *Cosmopolitan Review*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2011, available at <http://cosmopolitanreview.com/hacienda-santa-rosa>; Robin Waldman, 'Little Poland en la Hacienda', National Archives [blog], 22 April 2011, <https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/2011/04/22/little-poland-en-la-hacienda>
  - 20 Neumann 'The Admission of European Refugees from East and South Asia', pp. 65-71.
  - 21 Allbrook and Cattalini, *The General Langfitt Story*, p. 83.
  - 22 There were exceptions. For example, the Balachadi camp for children in India was supported by private donations.
  - 23 Jan K. Siedlecki, 'Outline of Financial Considerations', in Teresa Glazer, et al. (eds), *Poles in India 1942-1948*, Association of the Poles in India, London, 2009, pp. 37-8.
  - 24 Bogusław Trella, NLA, TRC 6175/15.



- 25 Boguslaw Trella, NLA, TRC 6175/15; Halina Juszczak, NLA, TRC 6175/14; and Tadeusz Dobrostanski, NLA, TRC 6175/13.
- 26 Paszkowska quoted in Allbrook and Cattalini, *The General Langfitt Story*, p. 78.
- 27 See the testimony of Wiesława Paszkiewicz quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 78–9.
- 28 Allbrook and Cattalini, *The General Langfitt Story*, p. 80.
- 29 Piotrowski, 'Introduction', p. 11.
- 30 Allbrook and Cattalini, *The General Langfitt Story*, p. 80.
- 31 Trella, NLA, TRC 6175/15; Dobrostanski, NLA, TRC 6175/13.
- 32 Dobrostanski, NLA, TRC 6175/13. Speaking about his time in the Scouts, which operated every day after school and on the weekend, Stanislaw Harasymow recalled that the aim was 'to improve yourself, you have to improve your character, improve your knowledge', NLA, TRC 6175/7.
- 33 Allbrook and Cattalini, *The General Langfitt Story*, p. 83.
- 34 See Piotrowski, 'Introduction', p. 11; Halina Juszczak, NLA, TRC 6175/14; Elizabeth Patro, NLA, TRC 6175/3; George Mazak, NLA, TRC 6175/2; Wojciech Marten, NLA, TRC 6175/16.
- 35 Bogdan Harbuz quoted in Allbrook and Cattalini, *The General Langfitt Story*, pp. 83–5.
- 36 Zenon Zebrowski, NLA, TRC 6175/12; Teresa Sosnowski, NLA, TRC 6175/9; Zofia Nadachowski, NLA, TRC 6175/11.
- 37 Teresa Sosnowski, NLA, TRC 6175/9; Zofia Nadachowski, NLA, TRC 6175/11; George Mazak, NLA, TRC 6175/2.
- 38 Bogdan Harbuz quoted in Allbrook and Cattalini, *The General Langfitt Story*, p. 85.
- 39 Wojciech Marten, NLA, TRC 6175/16.
- 40 Elizabeth Patro, NLA, TRC 6175/3.
- 41 Elizabeth Patro, NLA, TRC 6175/3; Janusz Smenda, NLA, TRC 6175/6; Nina Smenda, NLA, TRC 6175/5.
- 42 Elizabeth Patro, NLA, TRC 6175/3.
- 43 Bogdan Harbuz quoted in Allbrook and Cattalini, *The General Langfitt Story*, p. 77.
- 44 Teresa Sosnowski, NLA, TRC 6175/9.
- 45 Jay Mechling, 'Oral Evidence and the History of American Children's Lives', *Journal of American History*, vol. 74, 1987, p. 581.
- 46 Katie Wright and Julie McLeod, 'Public Memories and Private Meanings: Representing the "Happy Childhood" Narrative in Oral Histories of Adolescence and Schooling in Australia, 1930s-1950s', *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, vol. 32, 2012.
- 47 Carla Pascoe, 'Be Home by Dark: Childhood Freedoms and Adult Fears in 1950s Victoria', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2009, pp. 215–31.
- 48 Working-age displaced persons who were accepted as migrants to Australia first had to agree to fulfil a two-year labour contract, which could see them sent to work anywhere in Australia, even if this meant they were separated from their spouse and/or children. Regardless of their qualifications, most men were classified as 'labourers', while women were assigned work as 'domestics'. For further information, see Alexandra Dellios, 'Displaced Persons, Family Separation and the Work Contract in Postwar Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2016, pp. 418–32; Persian, *Beautiful Balts*, pp. 60–9.
- 49 Quirk argues that 'memories are continually re-worked to reinforce meaning that is relevant to the present situation and to protect the individual's sense of self'. Havel adds, 'we remember ourselves in the past as we are now'. See Christin Quirk, "'The other thing was...': The Reciprocal Interview Relationship and the Impact of "Unconnected" Traumatic Memories', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, vol. 34, 2012, p. 49; Brian F. Havel, 'In Search of a Theory of Public Memory: The State, the Individual, and Marcel Proust', *Indiana Law Journal*, vol. 80, no. 3, 2005, p. 698. See Alistair Thomson, 'A Past You Can Live With: Digger Memories and the ANZAC Legend', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, vol. 13, 1991, p. 13; John R. Gillis, 'Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship', in John R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994, p. 3; Valerie Bourke, 'Re-remembering the Bombing of Darwin', *Oral History Australia Journal*, vol. 36, 2014, p. 58; Susan Engel, *Context is Everything: The Nature of Memory*, W.H. Freeman & Company, New York, 1995, p. 81.
- 50 See, for example, Anne Wilson and Michael Ross, 'The Identity Function of Autobiographical Memory: Time Is On Our Side', *Memory*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2003, pp. 137–49; Susan Bluck, 'Autobiographical Memory: Exploring its Functions in Everyday Life', *Memory*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2003, pp. 113–23.
- 51 With this noted, we still managed to recruit a relatively representative sample of people from working-class and middle-class backgrounds, and were successful in meeting our other objectives: an even mix of male and female interviewees, who came from a wide range of camps in India and Africa and who settled in different places once in Australia.
- 52 For informative overviews of some of the key findings of this scholarship, written with oral historians in mind, see Alistair Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering in Oral History', in Donald A. Ritchie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, pp. 77–91; and Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 'Interpreting Memories', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd edition, Routledge, London, 2016, pp. 297–310.
- 53 Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd edition, Routledge, London, 2016, p. 54.
- 54 See, for example, Harald Welzer, 'Re-narrations: How Pasts Change in Conversational Remembering', *Memory Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2010, pp. 5–17, esp. pp. 10–11; Christina Daley, "'He Would Know, But I Just Have a Feeling": Gender and Oral History', *Women's History Review*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1998, pp. 343–59; Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2004, pp. 65–93; Robyn Fivush, 'Remembering and Reminiscing: How Individual Lives are Constructed in Family Narratives', *Memory Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2008, pp. 49–58.
- 55 Mary Chamberlain, 'Narrative Theory', in Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (eds), *Handbook of Oral History*, AltaMira Press, Lanham, 2006, pp. 389, 396, 399, cited in Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering', p. 88. As Thomson

then reminds us: ‘form as well as meaning is cultural, and that when we create and re-create stories about experience we adopt and adapt culturally available storytelling forms or genre’.

- 56 See, for example, the various essays in Selma Leydesdorff, Graham Dawson, and Kim Lacy Rogers (eds), *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives*, Routledge, London, 1999; and Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1995.
- 57 Steven Rose, ‘Memories Are Made of This’, in Harriet Harvey Wood and A.S. Byatt (eds), *Memory: An Anthology*, Chatto and Windus, London, 2008, pp. 65–6. For scientific explanations of memory distortion, see Daniel Schacter, Scott Guerin and Peggy St. Jacques, ‘Memory Distortion: An Adaptive Perspective’, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 15, no. 10, 2011, pp. 467–74; Liona Scully, Lucy Napper and Almut Hubbach, ‘Does Reactivation Trigger Episodic Memory Change? A Meta-analysis’, *Neurobiology of Learning and Memory*, vol. 142, Part A, 2017, pp. 99–107; Jason Chan, Krista Manley and Kathryn Lang, ‘Retrieval-Enhanced Suggestibility: A Retrospective and a New Investigation’, *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2017, pp. 213–29; Elizabeth Loftus, ‘Planting Misinformation in the Human Mind: A 30-Year Investigation of the Malleability of Memory’, *Learning & Memory*, vol. 12, 2005, pp. 361–6.
- 58 Anna Green provides a concise summary of Halbwach’s thinking. See Anna Green, ‘Individual Remembering and “Collective Memory”: Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates’, *Oral History*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2004, pp. 37–8.
- 59 Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994; Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities*, Routledge, London, 1994.
- 60 Alistair Thomson, ‘Family Photographs and Migrant Memories: Representing Women’s Lives’, in Alistair Thomson and Alexander Freund (eds), *Oral History and Photography*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012, p. 170. For further discussion concerning the way in which photographs evoke and influence memory and oral testimony, see other essays in this volume. Also see Jesse Adams Stein, “‘That was a posed photo’: Reflections on the Process of Combining Oral Histories with Institutional Photographs’, *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, vol. 35, 2013, pp. 49–57; and David Sweet, ‘Vida – A Pastor’s Wife’, *Oral History Australia Journal*, vol. 37, 2015, pp. 26–31.
- 61 Thomson, ‘A Past You Can Live With’, p. 13.
- 62 Out of respect for both this man and our informant, we have chosen not to divulge their names.