

Poland

Mary Nowak, retired history teacher from Kitchener read notes to "A Forgotten Odyssey" - an epic of human courage and survivors of the Soviet forced labour camps, compiled by Stefan Wisniowsky, Sydney, Australia and Art Wagner, Detroit, USA.

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-Ribbentrop 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 to 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 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 in 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 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 antagonized. 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 recognize 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 USA, South America, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia.