The Odyssey: How did Polish deportees keep the idea of Poland alive during the Second World War?

Warsaw. The Monument to the Fallen and Murdered in the East. A pile of religious symbols is heaped on a low, flatbed rail wagon, heading east. Viewed from the west, one can see the track over which the train has travelled. Each bronze sleeper bears the name of a place from which Poles were deported as slave labour to the USSR, along with the camps, collective farms, gulag outposts, and NKVD mass murder sites where they were sent. Beneath my feet is the word "Lvov", the nearest city to where my grandfather, Rudolf Tomasz Pawel Kochman, was deported from in 1940. He was far from alone. In 1940, following Russia's invasion of Poland, Stalin deported 1.7 million Poles to slave labour camps in Siberia and Kazakhstan.[1] Only one third of them survived. Of these, around 111,000 escaped the Soviet Union by undertaking an "Odyssey" rivalling the Greek epics.[2] In Homer's poem, it took Odysseus 10 years to return home to Ithaca after the Trojan Wars – a journey of around 1000 miles. For the Poles, the journey was three times as long, and took a third of the time – around 3 years. They made it voluntarily, and undertook a difficult trek through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and finally to Egypt. Not everyone completed the trip. The city of Teheran – without a Polish cemetery for over a thousand years – had, by 1943, one of the largest in the world. Those that did make it carried with them an idea of home, of Poland, which drove them on, to fight and if necessary, die to recover what had been taken. In doing so, they kept what had been lost alive.

In this essay, I will examine the nature of the Polish national identity. I will then explore the different attempts of neighbouring nations to eradicate the Poles, eventually culminating in the Second World War. Through this complex history of suffering and dislocation, I will seek to analyse how Polish culture survived through the civilian and military deportees of WW2. Finally, I will evaluate the settlement the Poles received at the end of the War, questioning whether Poland ever became more than an "idea" in 1945.

The concept of Poland as a political nation was a relatively new one in the 20th century; Rudolf (born in September 1919 near Lvov) would have been Austrian if he were born a year earlier, or a Soviet citizen of Ukraine 25 years later. The Second Republic had only been formed following the end of WW1, marking the first real period of Polish sovereignty for centuries. The 18th and 19th centuries had seen the geographical area now known as Poland under Prussian and Russian control, with various partitions and failed uprisings leading to Polish autonomy being eroded. Yet the Polish identity remained largely intact. People in the region continued to speak Polish, read Enlightenment authors such as Krasicki and Potocki, sang Polish folk songs, danced traditional polkas and mazurkas, ate platzki (potato pancakes) and pierogi (dumplings) much as their ancestors had under the first Polish Republic 200 years previously. They also worshipped as their parents, grandparents and great grandparents had.

Roman Catholicism provided the backbone for the Polish national identity. Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński remarked that 'nowhere else is the union of Church and nation as strong as in Poland', and this sentiment has held true in the area for many hundreds of years.[3] Although in 1931, 94% of Poles in the population identified as Roman Catholic, this is not to say that every citizen was

[1] "The WWII Polish Deportations – Still an Untold Story", *Polish at Heart*, Feb 10, 2018, accessed July 11, 2024, https://polishatheart.com/the-wwii-polish-deportations-still-an-untold-story

[2] Andrzej Szujecki, "Near and Middle East: The evacuation of the Polish people from the USSR" in *The Polish Deportees of World War II: Recollections of Removal to the Soviet Union and Dispersal Throughout the World,* ed. Tadeusz Piotrowski (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), p. 97

[3] Jan Kubik, *The Power of Symbols Against the Symbols of Power: The Rise of Solidarity and the Fall of State Socialism in Poland* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), p.113

imbued with devout piety; my grandfather had his own unique brand of Catholicism and had no qualms about disagreeing with God.[4] Moreover, conflicts such as the Wawel incident of 1937 involving the transfer of Józef Piłudski's remains emphasised that Polish allegiance was becoming increasingly divided between the 'Church as the age-old guardian and definer of national values' and the 'cult of Piłudski', which was in essence a secular interpretation of the aforementioned ideals.[5] Nonetheless, the stability that religion offered in the turbulent context of Polish history acted as an ideological anchor for the majority of citizens, uniting the population through faith in opposition to geographical labels. This was fundamental in ensuring the longevity of the national identity of Poland, for it meant that whilst a stable sovereign state would always be desirable, what it meant to be Polish could not merely be eradicated through the destruction of their homeland. On a personal level, religion bound the population together into communities centred around the local church. The significance of this must not be underestimated, particularly when so many of the accounts of Polish deportees recall the joy of returning to a church setting, recreating these communities all across the globe – Andrzej Czcibor-Piotrowski, a refugee in the Middle East, stated that he 'will never forget [his] *Sunday Missal*'.[6] Yet more broadly, Roman Catholicism has had a profound influence on the Polish nationalist movement, distinguishing the country from other Eastern European nations. Roman Dmowski, known as the 'father of Polish nationalism' was a controversial yet significant figure in the 20th century discourse on Poland's national identity. He argued that Catholic influences on Poland were a fundamental component of the Polish identity, stating that 'Catholicism is not a supplement to Polishness; it is somehow rooted in its very existence and to an important extent it even forms its existence. The attempt to separate Catholicism from Polishness in Poland… would mean destroying the very existence of the nation'.[7] Many contemporary historians are quick to emphasise his antisemitic tendencies and aggressive desires for a purely ethnically Polish state – these are indeed important facets of Dmowski's ideological beliefs. Nonetheless, his staunch conviction in the role of religion in the Polish nation should not be underestimated, particularly in the context of his significant and respected contributions to nationalist dialogue in Poland. Through this, it becomes clear that Roman Catholicism provided a framework for the enduring Polish spiritual and cultural identity.

When the various assaults on Poland are considered, it is evident that this endurance through a strong national identity was paramount in keeping Poland alive, either tangibly or as a concept awaiting materialisation. Various attempts had been made to eradicate Polish culture before WW2, and the principal offenders were Germany and Russia. The 19th century combination of the German *Kulturkampf* and Russian Organic Statute of 1832 saw Polish beliefs and independence being consumed by more powerful neighbouring states. This narrative was unfortunately not unique to the 19th century – the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact saw the nation being further carved up and absorbed by Germany and Russia in a chilling repetition of history. The atrocities which befell the Poles as part of "depolonisation" were unimaginable - and yet all too real. A key example of this is the Katyn Massacre of March 1940. Approximately 22,000 unarmed Polish military and police officers, as well as prisoners of war, were killed in a mass execution by the NKVD.[8] The USSR severed diplomatic relations with the London-based exiled Polish

[4]Central Statistical Office of the Polish Republic, *1931 National Census* (Poland: Central Statistics Office of the Polish Republic, 1938), p.15, accessed July 3, 2024, 1931 Census Data

[5] Neal Pease, "The 'Unpardonable Insult': The Wawel Incident of 1937 and Church-State Relations in Poland'" *The Catholic Historical Review* 77, no.3 (1991): p. 435, accessed July 2, 2024, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25023587

[6] Andrzej Czcibor-Piotrowski in *The Polish Deportees of World War II*, p. 117

[7] Andreas Kossert, "Founding Father of Modern Poland and Nationalistic Antisemite: Roman Dmowski," in *In the Shadow of Hitler: Personalities of the Right in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Rebecca Haynes and Martyn Rady (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), p.97

[8] Alexsander Gurianov, ed., *Those Killed in Katyn. The Memorial Book of Polish Prisoners of War - Prisoners of the Kozelsk NKVD Camp, Shot Dead at the Order of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Communist Party from 5 March 1940 Onwards* (Moscow: Memorial, 2015), p.68

government when an investigation was requested, only admitting responsibility in 1990 following 50 years of the blame being pinned on the Nazis. In addition, every-day citizens had to endure increasingly intense waves of Russification, consuming nearly every aspect of life. Life-long savings were lost overnight when the Polish currency was withdrawn without any exchange for the newly introduced rouble on 21 December 1939.[9] Following the disintegration of relations between Germany and Russia, the USSR intensely pressured many Poles to renounce their heritage and obtain Soviet citizenship under threat of repatriation to German-controlled areas of Poland.[10] Communist policies such as collectivisation sought to undermine Polish rural communities, creating dependence on the state and causing the eradication of regional cultures – a tactic which Stalin had employed both in Russia and Ukraine in the 1930s. The bravery and sacrifice of these Polish citizens is undoubtedly worthy of recognition. However, the legacy of Poland was carried by the survivors and escapees: the refugees. In deporting thousands of Poles, the Russians and Germans ironically ensured the long-term survival of the Polish national identity. Not only did they inadvertently facilitate the eventual re-creation of a Polish army, but civilian refugees formed communities around the globe, taking with them the seeds with which a Polish homeland could eventually be re-formed. In order to do this, further hardship had to be endured, testing the strength of Polish faith.

When 'God looked the other way', the Poles found an alternative source of collective memory to unite the population: suffering.[11] The universal difficulties Polish refugees faced during deportation acted as a form of negative cohesion, galvanising survivors with fury and a determination to someday have the right to a home once more. Rudolf recalled a rude awakening on the night of 10 February 1940. He and his family were given only 30 minutes to collect their possessions and get onto a Russian sleigh in -40 °C temperatures. You either submitted, or faced death by a revolver, or crueller still, you were left behind to freeze. His journey to a slave labour camp in Sverdlovsk Oblast was treacherous - his brothers got severe frostbite, but miraculously, his entire family survived. Many visual interpretations of the experience have subsequently been created by deportees, each of which highlight the terror and dreadful conditions many faced; one particularly compelling sketch depicts the dehumanising delousing process the faceless and vulnerable inmates of the gulag endured.[12] Rudolf spent the next 16 months chopping wood to make railway sleepers, creating a railway to take yet more poor souls deep into Siberia to die. Yet everything changed when the Germans launched Operation Barbarossa against Russia in June 1941. Stalin realised he needed allies and troops, and who better to turn to than the Poles he had been systematically murdering for the past years? With the Polish-Russian military agreement being signed, my grandfather and his family were separated, with Rudolf and thousands of others embarking on the Polish "Odyssey". However not all Poles were deported to Siberia initially; many were moved to the Middle East, India, Africa, New Zealand, and Mexico, carrying with them Polish culture which they subsequently integrated into their host communities. It was this two-pronged strategy during the Second World War which cemented Poland as a continuing idea: deportees scattered across the globe kept "Poland" alive, forming small enclaves and sharing Polish culture with others, whilst the significant military contributions of the Poles encouraged international sympathy for their lost homeland.

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[9] Karolina Lanckorońska, *Wspomnienia wojenne (War Memoirs)* (Krakow: Znak Publishing, 2001) p. 364

[10] Jan Tomasz Gross, *Revolution from Abroad*: *The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 396

[11] This is taken from the title of Wesley Adamczyk's *When God Looked the Other Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004)

[12] Sikorski Polish Club, "Artwork by a Polish Survivor of Soviet Deportations to Siberia", YouTube video, 0:38, posted by "SikorskiGlasgow", May 13, 2012, accessed July 9, 2024, Artwork by a Polish Survivor of Soviet Deportations to Siberia

Polish refugees guaranteed that the spirit of their homeland would not be eradicated, despite the best efforts of the Germans and Russians, through the formation of communities across the globe. One of the strongest examples of this is the cultural influence of Poland on Iran. Polish immigration is said to have had a 'tremendous impact on urban life in wartime Iran', particularly during a time of huge socio-political upheaval following the removal of the iron-fisted Reza Shah.[13] The Polish "strategy" was principally of integration; Isfahan, known as the 'City of Polish Children' saw 20 Polish establishments crop up, ranging from Roman Catholic Churches to schools.[14] Refugees sought to enrich the increasingly cosmopolitan nation, with journalists frequently describing scenes in Tehran being accompanied by Polish jazz orchestras and dances.[15] The incorporation of Poles into Iran was so effective that refugees began to gain economic success, using the laws of the country in their favour. Reporter Joel Sayre comedically notes that there was a thriving beauty parlour in Tehran, run by three Polish girls. They mainly catered for Iranian women and were incredibly popular. When their citizenship and right to run the establishment was questioned, they recalled that Islamic law permits a man to have four wives. All three girls married a willing native to cement their right to remain in Iran, and the business continued to prosper.[16] This integration facilitated not only the survival of Polish culture but sent out a strong message to the international community: that the Poles were a respectable, hard-working people whose culture merited protection. There was, of course, some tension with locals. Iran hosted almost one million refugees during the War, which was approximately 7% of its population.[17] The resulting demographic changes were difficult to ignore and given that Iran had already been a struggling nation before the refugees arrived, there was some reluctance to accept newcomers. Nonetheless, it is evident that the Poles were highly adaptable, and through the fusion of Polish and Iranian culture during WW2, the spirit of Poland could be kept alive. But the re-creation of a tangible Poland was left in the hands of soldiers such as my grandfather thousands of miles away.

The determination of one such soldier to do this was as a result of the suffering he endured at the hands of the Russians. Władysław Anders was an experienced military man before the Second World War. He had served in the Imperial Russian Army during World War One and had also been a member of the Polish Land Army once independence had been achieved in 1918. The Russians arrested Anders (who was leading the Nowogródzka Cavalry Brigade) in February 1940, incarcerating him in Lwów before transferring him to the Lubyanka prison in Moscow. There, he was interrogated, tortured, and unsuccessfully urged to join the Red Army in a typical Bolshevik pragmatism reminiscent of Trotsky's recruitment of former Tsarist military officers during the Russian Civil War.[18] Incredibly, his endurance ultimately paid off. With the betrayal of Germany, Russia eventually agreed to the formation of a Polish army – Anders' Army. The combination of Anders' previous military experience and hardship at the hands of the Russians had taught him a hard but significant lesson: that Polish freedom could never be achieved under Soviet leadership. This prompted Anders to agitate for a Polish exodus out of the USSR, catalysing the beginning of the "Odyssey". Those undertaking this journey frequently turned to religion as a comfort, despite the increasingly turbulent relationship many Poles shared with God. Anders became described as the 'Polish Moses', freeing Polish citizens from the gulags to salvation across the globe.[19] This

[13] Lior Sternfeld, "'Poland Is Not Lost While We Still Live': The Making of Polish Iran, 1941–45." *Jewish Social Studies* 23, no. 3 (2018): p. 102, accessed July 4, 2024, https://doi.org/10.2979/jewisocistud.23.3.04.
[14] Danuta Waszczuk-Kamieniecka, "The Genesis and History of Polish Isfahan," *in Isfahan - City of Polish Children*, ed. Irina Beaupré-Stankiewicz, Danuta Waszczuk-Kamieniecka, and Jadwiga Lewicka-Howells (Association of Former Pupils of Polish Schools, Isfahan and Lebanon: Hove, Sussex, 1989), pp. 122–37
[15] Sternfeld, "'Poland Is Not Lost While We Still Live': The Making of Polish Iran, 1941–45", p. 112
[16] Joel Sayre, *I Served in the Persian Gulf Command* (Isfahan: publisher unknown, 1945), p. 22-23
[17] Julian Bharier, "A Note on the Population of Iran, 1900–1966", *Population Studies* 22, no. 2 (1968): pp. 275
[18] Harvey Sarner, *General Anders and the Soldiers of the Second Polish Corps* (London: Brunswick, 2006), p.10
[19] "In the Steps of the Polish Moses", *The Jewish Chronicle*, 16 Dec, 2015, accessed July 8, 2024, In the Steps of the Polish Moses

divine imagery further accentuated the influence of Catholicism on the Polish identity, fusing their modern narrative with Biblical tales in a search for guidance and comfort. Yet those fleeing Russia were moving further away from their "promised land"; under Anders' leadership, the Polish II Corps began to fight to demonstrate that the Poles were worthy of a place at post-war negotiations.

The bravery and commitment of these soldiers is not recognised nearly as often as it should be. Naturally, the importance of the Polish government-in-exile should not be forgotten in fighting for Polish rights – the campaigns of President Władysław Raczkiewicz did much for the Polish cause in Britain. However, the war was not fought with words. The Polish II Corps provide irrefutable evidence of the crucial impact of Polish soldiers on the Allied war effort. Despite only seeing their first battle in May 1944 (which was understandable when their three-year gruelling trek across the Middle East is considered), the Poles were vital in offering a last push against the Axis Powers, permitting the Allies to eventually secure victory. The Battle of Monte Cassino is the clearest example of this. Although the Allies were numerically superior, the German-occupied, heavily fortified medieval monastery at the top of the hill meant that any attacking infantry were shot. The British, Americans, Indians and New Zealanders all failed when they tried to take the edifice. The Poles succeeded, suffering over 3000 casualties in the process.[20] My grandfather recalled the principal motivations of many of his fellow soldiers during this battle: to prove that Poland still existed and to earn a right to return through martial valour. However, if those young men fighting and dying in the hills and ravines of Cassino or the plain of Ancona thought their sacrifice would regain their homeland, they were wrong. By the time these heroic deeds had taken place, Churchill had already addressed the House of Commons, effectively giving half of Poland away to Stalin as a post-war settlement, including Rudolf's home, Lvov. Sovereign Poland was still an elusive hope, begging the question as to whether the Poles in reality lost the war despite being on the winning side.

A free Poland remained an "idea" following 1945. The Potsdam Conference, run by Churchill, Stalin and Truman, saw the Poles excluded from the negotiating table. The result was in essence a Western-approved Soviet take-over of Poland, forcing the nation to become a satellite state for the next four decades. The work of the Polish government-in-exile was undermined and delegitimised. Veterans recalled the frustration of having fought for so long for freedom in vain; Romuald Lipinski's moving memoir stated that the socialist government 'did everything to make our lives miserable and to force us to go back to Poland'.[21] My grandfather mirrored Lipinski's sentiments, for he was unable to return home to his family who were now trapped in Soviet Poland. The post-war negotiations were undoubtedly a complex affair, and it is not surprising that many nations faced disappointment. However, when the fact that Poland suffered the greatest proportional losses to its population (22%) is considered, it hardly seems fair that the considerable effort of Polish civilians and soldiers to keep Poland alive was smothered by the "Allies" (one of which had started the conflict as an enemy).[22]

Conceptually, the Polish civilian and military deportees were instrumental in ensuring the survival of Poland. The strong national identity of the country, once imbued with Roman Catholicism, was transformed by suffering into an admirable determination to persevere and re-claim their lost

[20] "75th anniversary of the Battle of Monte Cassino", *Website of the Republic of Poland*, May 17, 2019, accessed July 5, 2024, 75th anniversary of the Battle of Monte Cassino
[21] Romuald Lipinski, "My Story: Life After The War", *kresyfamily.com,* unknown date of creation, accessed July 5, 2024, https://www.kresyfamily.com/romuald--lipinski-11.html
[22] Tadeusz Piotrowski, *Poland's Holocaust: Ethnic Strife, Collaboration with Occupying Forces and Genocide in the Second Republic, 1918-1947* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998), p. 305

homeland. Against centuries' worth of persecution and repression, Polish culture endured, and the Polish people fought bravely to demonstrate its value. In the end, the disposition of military resources in the field and the presence of the Red Army on Polish territory meant the Allies had to let the Polish people down, refusing to back a sovereign Poland, instead allowing it to be absorbed by a nation which had a history of attempting to eradicate the Polish identity. As a country, Britain has a lot to be proud of during WW2. Yet caution must be taken to not forget the shameful treatment of Polish veterans. At the victory parade in London in 1945 the Poles were not invited to march, for fear – incredibly - of embarrassing the "great ally" Stalin. It is just possible that having not been embarrassed at killing tens of millions of his own countrymen by this time, Stalin might not have been too bothered about a little London parade. Even today, there is a tendency to not acknowledge or even understand the contributions of the Poles in WW2 and the suffering they faced. John Martin's poem 'The Second Polish Corps' compellingly portrays this modern-day ignorance:

My patient lay in the hospital bed
Unshaven, smelling of urine,
And bitten by lice,
Of no fixed abode,
Living on the street,
And unemployed,
Without family or friends.
In his Slavic accent
He declared
'I fought at Monte Cassino.'
And my junior doctors in their ignorance
Remained unmoved by man or by history.
And I turned to them
With my hand on the shoulder
Of my patient,
To address them on the greatness
Of the Second Polish Corps
And the infinite value
Of all human beings.[23]

As the West looked away, Poland faced 40 years of repressive Soviet rule. It was only through a combination of Soviet instability, concerted industrial action and civil disobedience orchestrated by the workers' movement *(Solidarność),* and inspirational support from the papacy that Poland became free in 1989. The national spirit of Poland had not been quashed – the rise in Polish literature recalling the difficulties of gulag life and Soviet repression, such as Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's *A World Apart*, provide evidence of the undaunted Polish identity. The sense of having been "betrayed" by the West also became a part of Poland's national identity. Many Poles felt that Great Britain, France, and sometimes the United States had failed to meet their legal, diplomatic, military, and moral obligations. Feelings ran deep. Having suffered national dismemberment at the start of the war, having suffered the horrors of deportation and endured the agony of the Odyssey, having fought courageously and victoriously in Italy, it was hard to accept the concessions made by the Allies to the Soviet Union during the Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam conferences, heartbreaking to witness their passivity during the Warsaw Uprising against Nazi occupation, and unbearable to accept post-war events which saw the new Poland embedded in the Soviet sphere of influence. Polish patriots were not alone in feeling this acutely. Churchill's

[23] John Martin, "The Second Polish Corps", in *The Origins of Loneliness: Poems and Short Stories in Five Moods,* ed. Miriam Richardson (London: self-published, 2004), p. 64

greatest disappointment of the war was that Poland, in the very hour of her liberation, was to discover that five years of Nazi slavery was instantly replaced by a Soviet slavery. Addressing the House of Commons on 5 June 1946 he said, 'The fate of Poland seems to be unending tragedy, and we, who went to war, all ill-prepared, on her behalf, watch with sorrow the strange outcome of our endeavours.'[24]

In the end, the surviving deportees, those who had survived the Odyssey and those who had survived the fighting had kept an idea alive. Those who fell also gave substance to the idea of a new Poland – they are a memory from history, a culture, people, and places which defy their tragic personal fate.

Word count = 3560

[24] Winston Churchill, *Parliamentary Debates - Foreign Affairs*, volume 423, column 2028, debated July 5, 1946, accessed Jul 11, 2024, https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1946-06-05/debates/d1c49426-5433-48be-891c-2f3217ab60d2/ForeignAffairs

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