

# The forgotten story of Polish refugees in Zambia

In 1942-43 Polish families were deported from refugee settlements in Iran to Zambia. They stayed in camps in Lusaka, Bwana Mkubwa, Fort Jameson (now Chipata) and in Abercorn (now Mbala). Dutch journalist and writer **Mary-Ann Sandifort** investigated this little-known history in the National Archives of Lusaka. She concentrated on the last camp that was built in Zambia, Abercorn, and went to Mbala to look for remains and to talk to people who could remember the camp.

**J**ust outside Mbala, in the corner of a dry, grassy field, is a tomb with the Polish national coat of arms on it – a white eagle. It is one of the few tangible things that is left of the Polish refugee camp dating back to World War II.

Lewis Sinyangwe of the Moto Moto museum in Mbala, says the empty field used to be an informal cemetery for the Polish camp. The only tomb left is this one. From the field a sandy road leads to a house built on the site of the former Polish camp. Mr Sinyangwe claims that even under this road remains of bodies still can be found.

The house belongs to Alfred Keita who started to build it in the 1980s. At his premises, only pieces of former walls remind one of the camp that was set up in 1942 at this exact place. Mr Keita deliberately did not touch these few remains of the camp: "I conserved the walls because I wanted to keep the memory of the camp and its poor inhabitants alive."

When Keita started to construct his house, he encountered remnants of tools of the Polish refugees. Later an official excavation was done under the supervision of archaeologist Liwyali Mushokabanji who brought everything he found to the Moto Moto museum in Mbala. It included basins, machetes, shovels, axes, picks, shoes and pieces of iron from the structures of the beds.

Some 600 Poles stayed in Abercorn camp between 1943 and 1948. They were part of a group of refugees who went through a series of harsh journeys. When eastern

Poland was occupied by the Soviets in 1939, they were deported to prisons, kolkhozes and camps in the Soviet Union.

When they were released two years later, Poland was still occupied. The refugees did not trust the Soviets, and after discussions the British, Soviet and Polish authorities offered them a passage out of the Soviet Union if they would send a son or husband to the British or Red army to fight against Germany. The families who agreed went via Uzbekistan to refugee camps in Iran, then called Persia. When the war came closer to Iran, another safe haven was needed. The British and Polish authorities decided to bring them to eastern and southern Africa, which was all British Territory in those days.

The number of Polish evacuees in

1943 in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia totalled some 20,000, most of them women and children. In 1945 Zambia had 3,419 Poles. Of those refugees 1,227 were in the Lusaka camp, 1,431 in the Bwana Mkubwa camp, 164 in the Fort Jameson camp and 597 in the Abercorn camp.

Abercorn was the last camp and when it was constructed in 1942 nobody in the neighbourhood knew what was happening. Joshua Sinyangwe, who was born in 1918, worked near the Polish camp when it was set up. "We could see they were building something outside Abercorn, but did not know what they were making. When the District Officer called us and asked for grasses for roofs, we knew they were constructing houses and realised that a camp was made. Some days

later we heard from neighbours they had seen vehicles at nighttime at the Boma. We immediately went to the Boma and saw people walking to the camp. It was a surprise for us, we did not know anything about those people."

The Poles who came to Mbala had another port of call than the Poles who went to Lusaka, Bwana Mkubwa and Fort Jameson. For the latter the ports of Durban and Beira were used, whereas the refugees for Mbala came via Dar es Salaam. From there they took a train to Kigoma, a boat to Mpulungu then by lorry to Mbala.

Alfred Keita (l) and Lewis Sinyangwe (r) at the former informal cemetery of the Polish refugee camp. (Picture Mary-Ann Sandifort)



## SMOOTH MILLET

Although the Poles were not supposed to have contacts with the Zambians and Zambians were not allowed near the camp, Damson Chizu Simpungwe, who was born and bred in Abercorn, often went to the camp as a boy: "We usually asked our mothers to give us some food and as soon as we gathered something, like a few eggs, we organised a big group of boys and went to the camp. My brother always escorted me, since I was still very small." Simpungwe and his friends sometimes secretly went inside. "I remember on one occasion I saw a hand grinding millet machine with some spilled millet near it. I tasted it and realised this millet was much smoother than ours, because we used stones to grind our maize."

At certain times Poles could leave the camp if they were escorted by security men and police. Says Simpungwe: "In the fruit season they were allowed to walk around and eat wild fruits from the thick forest we had in those days. To prevent accidents, we often picked the fruit for them, because the Poles did not know the trees nor the strength of the branches." Adults also went to the camp to sell hoes they had made and to teach the Poles how to make a handle for these hoes.

Food in the camp was sometimes scarce. The supply of it was the responsibility of the British colonial authorities who expected neighbouring countries like Tanzania to provide food. These supplies however were not very reliable and the District Commissioner every now and then went to the villages to ask for food and often chicken, groundnuts, maize and eggs were given. The Poles also received food from elsewhere, probably Europe. Morrison Sichilima recalls the distribution of foreign food very well. He lived as a small boy in the neighbourhood of the camp and once saw lorries loaded with cartons and brown/khaki bags. Later he saw the Poles eating beef, fish, beans and so on from the tins. "They sat in their wooden chairs, eating straight from the tins," he says with a twinkle in his eyes. "This tinned food must have come from outside, because in Abercorn we did not sell it," he adds.

When food was scarce the Poles often added local food to their diet. Sichilima: "We sometimes ate *masuku* from the forest. For us this was an extra, but for the Poles it was a serious supplement." The local boys also taught the Poles that grasshoppers were edible and nutritious and how to use a sling to hunt birds like guinea fowl. Because of

Right:  
Remains  
of tools of  
the Polish  
camp;  
Below:  
Remains of  
the walls of  
the Polish  
camp.  
Pictures  
Mary-Ann  
Sandifort



the food shortages the Poles tried to swap the second-hand clothes they received for food, but the authorities prohibited this practice. On the same hand the authorities did encourage the selling of old tyres from the camp, because the Zambians used the rubber for sandals and fishing nets.

## TOYS

From their visits to the camp, Sichilima and Simpungwe roughly remember what the camp looked like: a temporary village with a fence, small houses from wattle and daub, some tents and a big kitchen. Pictures of the camp and letters about the building of the camp draw an image of elongated buildings with white washed walls, grass roofs and small windows without glass. Janina Kuzio Lang who used to stay in Abercorn camp as a girl and was interviewed by the Canadian Polish Historical Society, said the camp had a public school, a hospital, a church, and a community centre. Wanda Nowoisiad-Ostrowska who was also in the camp when she was a small girl, said in the book *The Polish Deportees of World War II. Recollection of Removal to the Soviet Union and Dispersal Throughout the World* of T. Piotrowski, the camp was divided into six sections of single room houses, a washing area, a laundry, a church and four school buildings with seven classes. She remembered the cooking was done in a large kitchen in the middle of the camp and recalled the refugees sang songs in the evening, listened to the radio and made handicrafts with other women in the evenings. Some of these crafts were toys, which the refugees wanted to sell to shops in Lusaka. In December 1945 for instance, handmade toys were received in Lusaka. According to a letter about it, the British colonial authorities



in Lusaka were not pleased and disposed of the toys because they looked unfinished. Accompanying this letter was a package of Christmas sweets for the kids in Abercorn camp.

## DEMOLISHED

The dismantling of the Polish camps in East Africa started in 1944. In Zambia the Polish camp in Abercorn was not only the last camp to be built, but also the last one to be closed; in 1948 the Commissioner of the East African Refugee Administration wrote a letter about the deportation of the refugees from Abercorn camp - they had to go to Dar es Salaam and from there by ship to the United Kingdom. The commissioner said in the letter that the refugees had to be in Dar es Salaam around the same time as the ship to Europe, because the transit camp in Tanzania was full. He wrote: "I would stress the necessity of reducing their stay here to the minimum period possible, as the small part of our Transit Camp which we still retain, is fairly full now and we shall have to put up tents or other temporary accommodation for the bulk of Ab-

erncorn Poles."

Almost half a year later all refugees from Abercorn camp were gone. Everything that was left of the camp would be given away or demolished. Many refugees from Abercorn camp went to England where their Polish husbands and sons who had been fighting in the war, were getting courses for civilian jobs.

The Polish refugees in Zambia were not expected to stay after World War II. Only the ones who could get a job for at least six months or had a sufficient sum of money to sustain themselves, could stay. This resulted in Zambian residence for 245 evacuees. From Abercorn camp a single young man and a single mother with a son and a daughter got residence. The single man has not been traced, the woman moved to South Africa with her children. ♦

*Mary-Ann Sandifort is still researching Abercorn camp, so if you know anyone who stayed in Abercorn camp or anyone who has material of the camp, like pictures or letters, please contact [maryannsandifort@gmail.com](mailto:maryannsandifort@gmail.com)*