

MEMOIRS  
OF A SETTLER  
AND HIS FAMILY

***After World War I, Polish Army officers and soldiers, that fought for the independance of Poland, were granted government land.***

***Settlements on government land were established all over the country.***

Born in 1895, in Wilenszczyzna, Poland and at that time Poland was being partitioned by three powers — Germany, Austria and Russia. As a teenager he was called to serve in the Russian army. After a short indoctrination he was sent to the Balkans in Greece where the temperature and lack of action brought thoughts of escape. News of Polish Forces forming in Italy gave credence to these thoughts.

After escaping, he joined the ranks of the newly forming General Heller's army. Fights on Polish soil for Poland's freedom and at the end is awarded the Cross of Valour and various medals. Along with his detachment is put up eighteen kilometres from the city of Rowne overlooking the Horyn lake in a village called Szubkow where the villagers were mainly Ukrainians. He roomed in a small house where a young girl took care of her father and a small farm.

Outside the village many soldiers were stationed, and the government decided to divide the land up amongst them. It was decided that there would be three settlements Hallerowo, Jazlowce and Krachowce.

Herein lay the problem. What does a young soldier know about farming and building? After assessing the situation, He decided to ask for the young girl's hand as she was experienced in farming and would be, in the future, a good mother. The father in law's experience and suggestions on farming also helped immensely. Upon completion of the house they moved into it, taking her father with them. Next they built a stable for the cows and horses. The rich soil yielded excellent crops. They planted an orchard, and all along the road to Rowne-Tuczyn planted cherry trees. The last building that was built was a barn. All the buildings were surrounded by a white picket fence. A long chain was fastened from the stable to the barn and to the end of the chain a large dog

named Burek. The large yard was filled with chickens. During this time the family grew with two new additions, daughters Marysia and Ewa.

The year is 1923 these are not good times with very low wheat prices and a general lack of basic goods.

The death of their first daughter plunges everyone into deep sorrow and remorse. Two years go by and another daughter Hanka is born. Despite labouring intensely on the farm, in 1928, their first son Roman is born and by the end of the next year another son, Mietek.

Most of the new settlers, including my father, were still involved in army training and belonged to the Krakus unit. The settlement was filled with children and we concluded that a school house was necessary. A beautiful, large brick school house was built where in the basement it housed a dairy and a bakery.

In 1932, my sister, Marysia was born. Pork prices dropped just when we had a dozen to go to market and my father, from stress, lost his hair. Before Christmas we butchered a pig. It was delicious and naturally, we used its bladder for a soccer ball. We had good neighbours on the east side was Pleciak and behind Czerniak. On the west side lived Lepucki and behind him, Smigiera, who had a grown up daughter, Helka, with 3 children and her grandmother who in winter helped my mother with the plucking of goose feathers and threading on the spinning wheel. Across the street, opposite Pleciak's place, right up to the forest was Kurcz's farm. He had 2 sons with whom Roman and I often played named Benek and Irek (who sometimes wore his hair like a girl). Mr. Kurcz visited us quite often sitting on the chair and rotating himself on one chair leg. My mother always commented that he would break the chair as he was tall and hefty. Mr. Pleciak had a hand wound which did not allow him to work his farm, so

he rented it out and instead took a job running the store in the school building.

Our main friendship was with Hanka and Wacek Smigiera and Zdzich Lepucki. Once more there are new additions to our family two sons. One was named Bazil (mother called him Vasik) and in 1937 Janek was born when mother was 49 years old.

Leaving for school, Roman waited by the fence while I would go to collect 4 eggs to exchange for croissants in the store. Mother always saw us but never said anything.

The school had a large sports field surrounded by a track and beside it was a shooting gallery. Here various sports, skating, races, competitions and scout meetings were held. The church was about an hour away so it was decided to build a new one closer to the settlers. In 1937, between Hallerowo and Krachowce in Karlowszczyzna forest, a beautiful new church Matki Bozej Czestochowskiej was blessed. With great pomp and ceremony the Icon of the Virgin Mary was blessed. Crosses and medals of bravery belonging to the settlers adorned her robe. The Polish Lancers from Rowno carried it into the church. To see a Polish Lancer was a treat and a great attraction. After the religious ceremony a dance was held out in the open air there was a local band and the vodka flowed freely.

Father Kakol, the pastor, was a new young priest whose mother, a widow, still lived in the settlement. His brother, a pilot, died tragically in a plane crash. He was buried in the new church cemetery and his propeller was set into his monument.

On May 3, we attended mass to pray for our country and its citizens on the anniversary of Poland's Constitution. After mass, traditionally, sporting events and competitions were held on the sports field. One summer day on Sunday, on our way back

from church, we raided some cherry trees and threw the cherries inside our shirts. You can imagine what a mess we made out of our Sunday clothes. Mother was terribly angry and wanted to hit me with her tea cloth but I escaped.

September was the month that we sorted and laid out the tobacco leaves. In the evening we all would sit around and tie them twelve to a bunch. The large leaves the children tied, the medium ones went to the parents and the crumpled and town ones to grandfather, who had the most patience. He would press them out and make them look nice. Then they were tied in bundles and sold in November. The leaves were checked every day for mold. If any was found, that bundle would be destroyed. Going to market someone had to watch the rear of the buggy so no one would steal the tobacco. In October the sugar beets were harvested and sold.

One winter, my parents left for Tuczyn, grandfather was busy chopping wood and Romek brought over a long saw to cut down a large maple tree by the house. It was said that maple wood makes the best skis. Luckily, grandfather noticed us because the tree would have fallen right on the house. He never snitched on us to our parents. Grandfather was of medium height, with a gray beard and mustache which was always neatly trimmed. Despite his 80 years he looked great. In summer he tended the cattle and to make the time go quicker, he made wreaths for his granddaughters from wild meadow flowers. For his grandsons he braided straw hats. In the fall he made wooden spoons for mother and relatives for Christmas presents. He dressed in an old fashioned style with his white shirt hanging over his pants and belt around the waist and when he went to town he wore his best shoes. To get a ride to town, we would round the horses. One day Romek made a small whip, sat on a

cavalry horse, on which father used to ride in the war, and cracked the whip. The horse bolted and took off with him screaming. This made the horse full gallop believing it to be a charge command. It leaped over a fence and was charging towards the barn where the top half of the door was open. My father screamed bend down

. This undoubtedly saved my brothers life. Father said nothing, knowing that Romek would never do that again.

Tobacco was sowed along the side of the road. It had to be visible for the inspections. We would dead head them at the appropriate time and would be paid 10 cents by my father. After doing our homework, Romek and I would go and dead head 4 rows of tobacco in our bathing suits, because tobacco was very sticky. After we were paid we ran 3 km to the Horyn river to rinse ourselves off and then spend our money on sweets.

One Sunday, we were swimming by the mill. Romek could swim quite well. However, I swam like an ax. Two boys, who I didn't know got together with Romek and decided to swim the width of the river. They got across all right and rested awhile. On the swim back, the wind and waves picked up and carried Romek to about 30 metres of the mill and dragged him under. A man on shore, seeing this, led his horse into the water enabling Romek and the other boy to grab the horses tail. They pumped the water out of his lungs, gave him a swat on the rear and told him to go home. This news quickly reached my parents.

One afternoon Ewa asked me to go with her to pick mushrooms in the nearby forest. She quickly gather a whole basket and I barely a few.

Mondays were market days and my parents took a pig to sell. Ewa and Hanka wanted to make us something to eat because they knew that mother would not be home soon because after

market father liked to go drinking with the boys. My sisters found a dozen eggs lying in stinging nettle by the fence. Upon breaking them they found them to have chicks inside, so we had nothing to eat.

To get to the meadow where the river was, we had to ride 8 km through the forest. We made fishing rods from horse tail hairs tied to a branch with a cork and a goose feather for a float. There were a lot of small fish in the crystal clear water and a lot of joy when one was actually caught!

When the harvest was over, mother would leave for a few days to pick blueberries. She would return with at least 3 bushels full. For the time mother was away, Ewa was the lady of the house.

We always had dried fruit and blueberry syrup in the house. If father had an upset stomach, he would ask mother for some syrup. Little Johnny heard and said that he also had an upset stomach so he could have some syrup too.

One day Benek and Irek Kurcz were tending the cows where a fence runs along a ditch. Playing, they forgot about the cows who went into the ditch, under the fence and into the forest. When the ranger brought them home my father had to pay a penalty to get the cows back. My father never hit us, but the lecture was worse than a beating.

Our dog, Burek, ripped off his leash and someone shot him by the forest mistaking him for a wolf. He was replaced by a small black and white dog who adopted us. We called him Znajdek (Foundling) and he remained with us.

When ice formed between the high ridges, we had a skating rink. We made our own skates by carving wood in the form of a skate and inlaying a wire into the wood. Then we used leather straps cut out of old shoes to tie the skates to our shoes.

After skating awhile we gathered to chat and at that point the ice cracked and many of us fell in. Romek grabbed a branch and with his other hand my hat which was tied under my chin and pulled me up on the ridge. Shaking and stiff I barely made it home. After a change of clothes and my mother's scolding we went to sleep.

Twenty years passed peacefully since the last war. The older children help in the field and in the house. This saves money as we don't have to hire anyone to work. Plans were made for the childrens' future. The older boys would go to military school, etc...

Unfortunately, it was not to be. Poland was invaded by the Germans in 1939 and from the other side by the Soviets. Our plans, dreams and 20 years of hard work vanished. Father was called to serve in the army but was not accepted by the commission. Disappointed, he returned home which made mother and all of us very happy.

Columns of Soviet soldiers passed by for days. They did not look like an army. Some were dressed in civilian clothing, without rifles or even saddles on their thin, meager horses. They came to our house demanding arms as they knew that whoever belonged to the Krakus Unit possessed a lance, sabre and rifle. My father had to give up his lance and sword but he buried the rifle in the field. He knew that if they found the rifle he would be executed. He explained to them that he had to turn in his rifle after the war. Another night the tanks rolled on endlessly. The Ukrainians let loose a rumour that the settlers were going to raid Szubkow. In this way they wanted the Soviets to kill the settlers and their families. Two Ukrainians were arrested as they tried to cause a disturbance in the settlement. Furthermore, the settlers were forced to vacate their farms leaving the Ukrainians

in charge of their live stock. The Ukrainians, instead, busied themselves making moonshine and ignoring the needs of the life stock.

Because of our large family and the problems they would have putting us up elsewhere, we were permitted to remain on the farm. Another reason could have been that mother and grandfather were of Ukrainian descent.

Grandfather left us to live with relatives in Kozlin. On the 10th of February, a date we will never forget, a Soviet officer rushed into our house as we slept, screaming for us to get our things together and get out. He was the only Russian officer, the rest of them were Ukrainians with red bands around their arms. This is when we lost everything we had worked for. Father was ordered to stand by the wall with his hands up and the rest of us were in shock, crying and not knowing what to do next. My father, not losing his head, started shouting directions to take this and that and kitchen utensils, bedding etc. He wanted to take the clock on the wall but the Ukrainian who was taking over the house wouldn't let him.

Our horses were hitched to our sled and we were taken to the train station in Tarnopol. Poor Znajdek ran alongside the sled with his head down glimpsing at us occasionally as though he knew he wasn't going to see us again. We were loaded on the freight train like sardines into a can.

For all of us we were allowed one wooden bed and in the middle stood an iron kettle stove, but there was no wood to burn for warmth. The goose down duvet kept us warm and the hole in the floor served as a latrine.

A Ukrainian suggested escape to father. Father asked him, are you joking? What would a woman do alone with seven children?

We left that evening and the sobbing and wailing drowned out the sound of chugging. We were going in a north-easterly direction and all the older folks knew it was to Siberia. We had no food or water and the children were crying from hunger. Through the bars in the small window I tried to scoop some snow off the roof. I even licked a screw to get some moisture and my tongue stuck to it. I jerked my head back and ripped the skin off my tongue. Occasionally the train would stop on some side track and the guards would escort three people to get some boiled water and sometimes some bread. We passed the city of Kotlas, we were taken off the train and deposited into a large hall in a village along the Dzwina river. In the morning the children were put on to sleds and the adults walked alongside along a frozen river towards Archangielsk. Two days later we arrived at our destination.

There were log houses in the forest with wooden bunk beds and an iron kettle stove in the middle. We were lucky, there was a lot of wood in the forest.

At dawn everyone eleven years of and older was forced to go to work. The younger children were taken to a hall and were baby-sat by Russian women. The men had to cut down tall straight fir trees and the women had to pull them out towards the railroad tracks.

According to my father's diagnosis, because there were no doctors, I had pneumonia. He looked for cupping-glasses or even any glasses. Someone did in fact have the real thing. He rubbed the inside of the glass with spirits, lit and quickly applied it to my back and chest. This brought up all the bad blood to surface of the skin. He did this for 2 weeks as I lay there almost unconscious from fever. After 2 weeks my back and chest were black but I felt better.

In May 1940, the snow started melting. We were moved to a prison camp with a high wooden fence surrounding it. Father worked at finishing wooden products such as wooden beams, etc. Mother, Ewa, Hanka and Romek were given the task of removing bark from downed trees. I had to go to school as I wasn't eleven years old yet and the younger ones to nursery school. Our parents shared their portions of bread with all the children (Stalin's rule was, you don't work, you don't eat). Workers were rarely paid. In the summer I had the job of buying bread and kasha (buckwheat) before everyone returned home from work. Soup was made from kasha and adding bread to it at least filled us up.

Water that was spilled by the pump was starting to freeze. Winter was coming. Boards from the tall fence were missing here and there. If anyone was caught taking them they would be punished by sleeping in the barn or worse. My mother, on her way back home picked up some twigs and small branches for firewood. She was stopped at the gate and charged with theft. She slept in the cold barn for three nights.

When I turned eleven I was sent to work cutting off the core from logs. Then together with Romek sawing and quartering logs. The worst part was getting the wheelbarrow uphill. One of us would pull and the other push. This winter was particularly bad. Our shoes were worn out so we wrapped our feet in bags. It was -60° C and frostbite affected hands feet and noses. Our father's constant reminders kept us vigilant and we avoided frostbite.

We received a package from mother's relatives a piece of pork fat and kasha.

Everyone had lice, resembled a skeleton and had swollen bellies. However, God was looking after us. If I am not mistak-

en, in July 1942, we were called to the hall, we thought for another Stalinist propaganda lecture. Instead, we were told that we were free, that in two days we will be given our documents and a barge will take us to Kotlas. Shouts of joy, crying and praying broke out in the hall. On the day we were leaving we were given bread for three days and some money. Our family received 3 breads which mother gave to Ewa for safekeeping. Ewa put the bread in a basket and put it under the bench on which she was sitting and held the basket between her legs. When it came time to eat, the basket was there but the bread was gone. Father's please for the return of the bread went unheard. However, some people, who themselves did not have enough, shared their bread with our family of nine.

In Kotlas we found a Polish organization that helped us. We were loaded on to a train and given food. We travelled south and hunger once more took over. Money was worthless no one would accept it. Cigarettes were rolled using the Soviet Ruble. Complaints were being heard that 'even the Poles had forgotten about us'.

At the city of Andziezan father had us get off the train. He sat us down beside a fence and disappeared. We were worried about leaving the train did he do the right thing? Mother tried to calm us but it wasn't convincing. When he returned, he led us to a spot where there were two two-wheeled buggies tied to one horse. We rode to a commune named Stalin where we received bread, mother was permitted to gather some tomatoes and beets and father was employed to clean the local airport. It took us a week to regain our strength. A few days later an NKVD (police) officer stopped us to check our documents. Of course, we were immediately escorted back to the train station. In the train we were assigned to one bench for all of us, and a hammock above

it so we had to take turns sleeping.

The train consisted of 12 wagons and all the passengers except us, were Polish Jews. At night it rolled out into, unknown to us territory. Rumours had it that it was going back to Siberia. At dawn we found ourselves in the city of Dzalabat in Uzbekistan where we stood all day under the watchful eyes of the NKVD. At night we returned to Andziezan and back again. For three nights we went back and forth. Nobody wanted to accept a train of Jews with us amongst them. Luckily, mother still had some of the beets that she gathered on the farm and these kept us alive. When the wagon doors opened in Dzalabac most of the passengers were in no shape to get up. We don't know what happened to them because we were put on buggies and transported to a commune again named Stalin. My father was given a job cleaning stables and looking after the horses that were in pitiful shape. The rest of us had to go into the field and pick cotton. The children had milk and from time to time father would bring home flour and lamb and horse meat (which was a very popular meat here).

Winter and spring were mild. We had food and the mud hut we lived in had a stove. All the wheat from the field went straight to the government. The silos were empty. A stray dog wandered by our hut and my father took care of him very quickly. He hid the meat wrapped in cloth in the base of the stove. The Uzbek locals laughed at us calling us Russian 'dog eaters'. They referred to us as Russians because they didn't know where we came from.

There was a river not far from us where close to the shores grew tomatoes. Since the river wasn't deep, we would cross over being careful not to be caught by the Uzbek guard, and pick the tomatoes. Then Ewa would collect all the turtles she could carry in a bag and bring them home.

Suddenly, my brother Basil died. His body was laid in a small coffin made from thin planks. Father dug a deep grave so the jackals wouldn't get at it.

Hanka and I got bloody dysentery so mother and Ewa took us to the local hospital in Dzalabat. They found out from some soldiers that there was a Polish Social Services Bureau. After registering there, they were allotted some bread which mother sliced thinly, dried and brought to us, handing it to me through the hospital window each day. Throughout our 2 week stay in the hospital we were not given any medication.

Ewa found a field of potatoes and would dig some up at night. If she were caught it would have been the death penalty.

In late autumn, Polish soldiers were passing through the commune. In conversation with them we found out that the last transport will be leaving crossing the border. In the dark, just after midnight we left our hut slipping out the window and fled to Dzalabot. We stayed out in the open by a fence near the army kitchen. The soldiers gladly shared their food with civilians at their gate. Occasionally an NKVD officer would chase us away but we would eventually return. A woman had two pairs of shoes from her deceased child to sell and agreed to let me sell them for her. I guess I looked honest because she trusted me. I took the shoes to the market and in a matter of minutes they were sold, which was a good thing as I had no sales permit. Once I had gotten paid for the shoes, I went around the market sampling food. The vendors let me do this because I would show them my money. I returned to the woman who gave me the shoes to sell and gave her the money.

We were told, in secret, that the last transport would be leaving at midnight. Crowds showed up at the station. Masses of

Jews and other nationalities also showed up. However, they didn't have the right documents and could not board. Early morning found us at the docks in Krasnowodzk on the Caspian Sea and here we waited for the boat. There was no food and water was brought in cans. I didn't know that sea water was salty and although it was dirty I had a sip. I spat and spat and in the end was thirstier than before.

The small freighter docked and we boarded it. Thanks to the crackers the army gave us we lived through the voyage. We anchored 2 Km from shore and were taken by motorboats to shore to Pachlewie in Persia.

Our heads were shaved, we bathed and our clothes and possessions were burned. We were dressed in anything that was in the store room. Men were dressed in pajamas, women in night gowns and children in bathing suits. Then we were given 2 blankets, each a different colour, and a place on the sand to sleep under a lean-to. These were our only possessions. There was a common kitchen from where we had rice and lamb every day to regain our strength. Whoever overate developed dysentery and wound up in the camp hospital.

Romek wanted to enlist into army cadets but got jaundice and stayed with us. Here, we met our neighbour Mrs. Lepucka, who told us of the tragedies that had befallen the transport we escaped from. They were taken to some godforsaken place where a stream ran through and fed salty fish. They drank filthy water from the stream and got bloody dysentery and typhoid which spread to most of them and they died. Father took her to the hospital but it was too late to save her.

Here began the good life. Food three times a day and baths in the sea whenever we wanted. Dressed in bathing suits we didn't have to dress or undress. The soldiers gave us canned or

ground meat we were in heaven! Next we were transferred to a school hall in a place called Achwas at the foot of the mountains. Here we slept on the floor. We were fed home made macaroni in milk made by ladies who were assigned by the commandant. The boys' job was lighting rock-oil for the stoves. I would wake up early so I didn't have to do it. Two weeks passed and again, we were taken to another camp in Teheran. We received more clothes and the kitchen had a more varied menu. School classes were being organized but we had no note books.

We again, leave Teheran on a not too bad passenger ship. There was a lot of anxiety about mines in the water. In 2 weeks we made it to Bombay, India, unloaded some things off the ship and we were on our way. The next day we were in Karachi, where we were greeted by Red Cross nurses and taken to a camp in a desert by the city. Large tents were erected and surrounded by barbed wire. We had beds! The kitchen menu was good and for the first time we were given pocket money as was the English custom.

Christmas was celebrated in the English barracks and they showered us with sweets, dolls, toys and balls. Our stay here was extended because I got malaria and Marysia an unknown illness. Mother stayed at her side in the hospital in Karachi. After they returned from the hospital everyone was informed about the journey awaiting us to Africa.

The long and dangerous voyage on the freighter was not pleasant. All we saw throughout four weeks was water and dolphins. Another freighter was chasing us so all the women and children were placed to one side. This way when they passed us that was all they could see not the army on board. It worked. We docked in the port of Mombassa. This was our first meeting with a black person. Going by train through Kenya we could see that

there were people worse off than we. Naked children ran alongside the train with their arms stretched out begging to throw them something. The next 200 miles we saw nothing but sand. Dusty and tired we finally arrive at our destination.

On a meadow in the middle of a jungle stood mud huts covered with elephant grass with a hole on top for ventilation. The camp was named Masindi as it was close to the city of Masindi. There were five villages and two consisting of a holding village and an orphanage. We spent a week in holding, where we were examined to determine the status of our health.

In late 1943, we received cork helmets, more clothes and linens and placed into the fifth village. It took us a while to get used to the tropical climate. Nurses would go around and check under everyone's nails and their heels for parasites that get into crevasses and lay eggs.

Fresh food was gotten from the stock room and mother would cook it on the stove outside the hut. Gardens were springing up. Everyone planted flowers, pineapples, bananas and papayas. We attended school from eight in the morning till two in the afternoon with a ten minute break each hour. ZHP (scouting) was formed to which nearly everyone belonged. As well, places of work were being opened sewing, footwear, carpentry and others. Even though the pay was meager at least we had pocket money and something to do.

Ewa and Romek enlisted in the army and left. Khaki material was supplied and we went to work sewing gray scout uniforms. The youth frequents the scouting barrack for meetings and games. Scout leader, Kozial was sent here by the army as a scouting instructor. He established rules, regulations and ranks. I had the pleasure of starting up a group of Beavers called 'Rip Out Oaks' in another village.

The camp expands. An extra village a student residence, a high school and commercial school were built. The school residence housed students from other African villages. A huge hospital at the foot of mt. Wanda was also built. The biggest feat was building the church alongside the hospital. It was constructed tediously in the form of a cross by men, women and youth. I remember making bricks by the stream in the jungle. My father was in charge of the brisk making operation. When the church was finished, father went to work in the footwear factory and later became the boss.

Next sports clubs are organized volleyball, soccer and even a boxing club., Great, but who was funding all of this? UNRA (United Nations Relief Association).

The unexpected death of our saviour General W. Sikorski plunged all Poles in the free world into deep sorrow. The Army of the II Corps fought alongside the 8th Army. Every victory seemed to bring us closer to our return to Poland.

In 1945, the war ended and the world rejoiced. We did not. Poland was sold to the communists the same ones that stole our lands, sent us to Siberia and starved us.

Living in Africa was becoming a serious concern. The Africans were beginning to rebel against the British who were in charge of the colonies. It was decided that we would leave for England as the Polish Army was integrated into the British army.

In the latter half of 1948, we left for Mombasa. We slept on the docks awaiting the ship. We said our farewell to Africa and its peoples and sailed into the unknown Britain. On the way we visited the Suez Canal, Malta and Gibraltar.

After living in a hot climate the British Isle was quite cold. Our appetites heightened but there was not enough food to go around in post-war England. We were sent to a camp named

Eastmoor near York in northern England. Once more, a common kitchen feeds us three times daily. In spring we set out to find jobs. I chose the textile industry not knowing what it was. The girls got jobs at Rowntree Chocolates in York. The camp was dwindling as people found jobs, moved out or bought houses. Romek stayed in Sheffield, Ewa in London, Hanka in York and Marysia and I in Huddersfield. Janek and our parents also stayed in Huddersfield. For the holidays we would all meet at our parents' place. We all have families and some even their own businesses.

Father, at age 79, died of lung cancer and three years later mother joined him. In 1990, Romek and Janek also died. The rest of us, in advanced age, revel in our children and grandchildren.

*I offer these memories  
to my sister, Marysia.  
Toronto, 1998*

*Translated from Polish  
by Wanda Kornatowska*



**MIŁTEK CISALOWICZ**