

Our Southern Poles

The Polish Borders at Otago Schools



Two years ago the Museum developed a small display *From Poland to Pahiataua* to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of New Zealand's wartime welcome to a large group of Polish orphans. That display subsequently went on to the Canterbury Museum and to Te Aratoi in Masterton. It was then borrowed by the Polish Heritage Museum in Auckland to send on to Poland where a commemoration of the Pahiataua story is being held during May 2006 at the University of Lublin. The Museum is returning to the subject of Otago's Polish heritage this month with a new display in the *Ka Hau E Wha* Community Gallery. This time the focus will be on all three waves of Polish settlement in Otago: the pioneers of the nineteenth century; the orphans and post-war refugee arrivals; and the more recent era of late twentieth century refugees and skilled Polish migrants.

In *From Poland to Pahiataua* the Museum traced the story of the wartime refugees through the experience of the Wierzbinski family. Two of the surviving members of this family subsequently settled in Otago, though neither spent any of their childhood here. There were, however, a significant number of Polish adolescents who spent their formative years at Otago Catholic secondary schools. This was not part of the original plan for the Polish orphans. Their wartime sojourn in New Zealand was meant to be temporary, pending a return to Poland at war's end. Accordingly the Pahiataua camp was structured as a 'Little Poland' with all education in Polish and according to the Polish school curriculum. It was only the post-war political settlement, which abandoned Poland to Soviet domination, that prompted a change of direction.

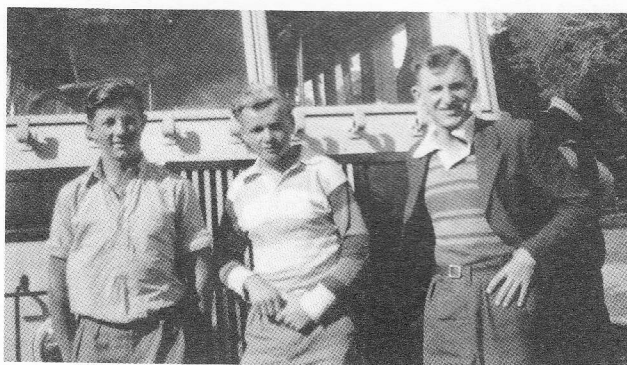
The wartime Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, had taken a deep personal interest in the well-being of the Polish orphans. With the dramatic turn of events in Europe in 1945, he offered all of the Pahiataua Poles a permanent home in New Zealand. Most accepted this offer but then had to chart a new life's course adapting to the New Zealand way of life. The secondary age children at Pahiataua were consequently sent out in small groups to board at Catholic secondary schools all over the country. The first groups arrived in Dunedin and Oamaru in 1946. Over the next seven years some 47 Polish girls attended St Dominic's and St Philomena's in Dunedin while smaller groups of girls and boys attended Teschemaker's and St Kevin's in Oamaru.

Some reminiscences about this Otago education were published in the book *New Zealand's First Refugees: Pahiataua's Polish Children* put out by the Pahiataua orphans' group in 2004. Stanislaw Manterys came to St Kevins after first being at St Pat's in Wellington. His sisters Anna and Stefania were already at St Dominic's in Dunedin: 'I did not regret it [the move from Wellington] because the four years at the college were my best, and the teachers of the Christian Brothers Order gave me a good education and insight into the New Zealand character.'

Stan's sister Stefania (later Sondej) also appreciated her time in the south: 'At St Dominic's College, the Sisters, instead of pitying us ("poor little Polish girls, they don't know any English") and giving us easy work as some other schools did, constantly encouraged us to do the work that the rest of the class was doing. We cried, struggled and thought the nuns cruel, but our work improved steadily. I never dreamed of attempting any of the public examinations ... but again the Sisters signed me up saying: "You can do it, Stefania". ' When the exam results were published Stefania was delighted to receive a congratulatory letter from the seemingly stern Mother Patricia at St Dominic's: 'Dear Stefania, A thousand congratulations on your success in the University Entrance! I wonder if you could imagine just how happy I was to know your name was in the paper. It is a great reward for your diligent study. May God bless you in the years to come with a like success.' Stefania went on to graduate B.A. from Victoria University in 1956 and a career as a secondary school teacher.

Stefania's older sister, Anna Manterys, had been the first of the St Dominic's Polish girls to carry her studies as far as the University Entrance, going on to Training College in 1951. Like her classmates she made her social debut that year at the Dunedin Charity Ball. It was all a far cry from the family's appalling experiences just ten years earlier. In the dead of winter Russian soldiers had come knocking on the Manterys' door at Zarogow. Along with over a million other Poles they were deported to slave labour camps in Siberia. Their parents had died of hunger and exhaustion two years later in Uzbekistan on the route to freedom in Iran. Coming to New Zealand as orphans, one can only wonder at the difficulties these children faced in making their way in the world. Their early lives had been so blighted by the evils of war and oppression. It is good to think that their few years in Otago helped redress the balance a little.

Seán Brosnahan



Polish boarders at St Dominic's 1947: Stefania Manterys, Anna Manterys, Christina Czoba, Dioniza Gradzik, Irena Cwirko-Godyka, Roma Sokalska, Helena Chwieduk, Zofia Rombel - Hocken Collections; Frank Kubiak, Stanislaw Manterys and Jozef Zawada, pupils at St Kevin's. - Jozef Zawada