

Forgotten Polish Exodus to Persia

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TEHRAN — From time to time, the lone caretaker at the dreary cemetery gets a letter from abroad asking him to light a candle at one of the hundreds of identical headstones at the far end of the walled, unmarked graveyard.

A forgotten chapter of World War II is buried in this Roman Catholic cemetery in a poor neighborhood of Tehran. The occasional candles are the only flickers of remembrance for 1,892 Polish men, women and children far from home and for the calamity that befell them.

In September 1939, Hitler and Stalin pounced on Poland, dismembering it in one of the bleakest chapters of Polish history. Joseph Stalin had tens of thousands of Poles carted off to his Russian prison camps, but when Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Stalin freed the Poles and said they could join a Polish army being formed by the Allies.

That force was to assemble in Persia, the old name of modern-day Iran, which was then under British influence.

In a matter of weeks, floods of starving, haggard Poles began trudging toward Iran, most to volunteer for the new army. But many among them were women and children who had no place else to go. In all, between 114,000 and 300,000 Poles are thought to have made it to Iran.

Most eventually moved on to other parts of the world. Some stayed in Iran, where only about a dozen are still alive.

Among them is Helena Stelmach, 69, who lives with her Iranian husband. They have two sons in their early thirties.

Anna Borkowska, 83 and probably the oldest of the survivors in Iran, also married an Iranian, a police officer, and had a son. Her husband died in 1968, and their son died in 1982 at age 26. Her mother died several years later.

Despite the decades that have passed since they were cast up on the Iranian shore, both women fit reluctantly into their present lives.

They speak the language of their childhood; Persian is uttered with thick accents and frequent pauses to search for words. Both took the last names of their Iranian husbands but prefer their Polish ones.

When Borkowska sits at a cheap piano in the living room to relieve the loneliness, the words of Polish songs stir her modest home. On the stairs outside Stelmach's flat, a pile of Polish magazines waits to be thrown out.

Both homes display photos of Iran's late Islamic leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, alongside pictures of Pope John Paul II and portraits of Jesus and Mary.

A Promise of Freedom

A world at war had forgotten the tens of thousands of sick, starving Poles enslaved in Stalin's forced labor camps. In the summer of 1941, startling news began circulating among the inmates: Hitler had invaded Russia.

At a hellish prison in the thick Basharova forest of Arkhangelsk, the Russian commandant had told the arriving prisoners that they would remain there forever, Anna Borkowska recalls. But now, the Soviet Union was in danger.

On a grim day like any other, as they toiled in the forest felling firs and dragging them to the river, the commandant summoned the prisoners for a stunning announcement: They were free.

Two years earlier in Poland, weeks before Borkowska's 23rd birthday, her life had been shattered by war and exile.

She was in love with Jan, a fellow university student she hoped to marry. She never learned what became of him and never again walked the streets outside her Warsaw home, where they had strolled hand-in-hand, Anna humming a new song she had learned on the piano, autumn leaves crackling under their feet.

Stalin began emptying Poland of anyone who could resist the occupation. First went military officers and their families, then the intelligentsia, and last anyone with wealth, influence or education. Borkowska's father was a shipyard executive, and his two children, Anna and Victor, had both finished college.

When the door-to-door arrests began, the family escaped to the home of a poor relative in the countryside, where Anna's father died. One midnight, weeks later, the rest of the family was picked up by the Russian secret police, herded into locked freight trains with thousands of other deportees and banished to Siberia.

There, only the strongest survived. Borkowska's brother, two years younger, caught pneumonia and died alone in a hospital a year before they were all set free.

"When we buried him, he had a pained expression on his face," Borkowska says.

"It was because he died alone, without anyone around who cared," she adds, clutching the favorite remembrance of her brother, a childhood photograph showing the boyish Victor with an oversize violin under his chin.

Traveling With Death

With the deadly Siberian winter approaching, and afraid that orders for their release could be revoked, swarms of exiles from all corners of the Soviet Union--Siberia, Vorkuta, the Ural Mountains, Kolyma, Novosibirsk and Kazakhstan--began dragging themselves toward Persia. They abandoned hard labor camps, prisons, forests, mines--anywhere Stalin had needed slaves.

This time when they loaded into railway cars there was no despair, but hunger, disease and death traveled with them. Rape, murder and theft were other perils of the road, especially for women or children traveling alone.

On a cold day as winter approached, 10-year-old Helena Stelmach and her mother huddled off a train in Tashkent, capital of Soviet Uzbekistan. They joined a young widow and her child in search of food and shelter.

An old man in a shabby coffeehouse fed the ragged travelers and gave them shelter at a vacant house. But his was not an act of kindness. He returned that night and tried to attack the

women, who fled into the icy darkness, dragging their children behind. Another man gave them a place to sleep by the warmth of a furnace at his bakery.

The boats and small ships that ferried the Poles across the Caspian Sea on the last leg of their journey were vessels of hope. But greatly overloaded and without clean drinking water or sanitation, for some they became the bearers of death. The sea was the graveyard for those who began to drop from typhoid and other diseases.

Many of those who died were children. Stelmach, whose father had been off fighting the Germans when mother and daughter were deported to Siberia, survived the voyage through a stroke of luck.

"The ship's captain had a son suffering from hemophilia. Mother knew nursing, and she offered to care for the boy in return for a place in the cabin and good food and water," Stelmach recalls. "All around us on the boats, people were dropping like flies."

Finally, on a bitterly cold morning, the refugees began going ashore at the Iranian port of Anzali (now Bandar Anzali), broken, sick, hungry and infested with lice.

Chronicling a Calamity There was fresh snow on the ground the morning Gholam Abdol-Rahimi, a struggling photographer in Anzali, emerged from bed to witness ships disgorging disheveled refugees.

"They were in bad shape, thin, ill and in rags," Abdol-Rahimi said in "Lost Requiem," a film made in 1983 by the Iranian director Khosrow Sinai. "A friend of mine, a carpenter, used to make boxes [coffins] for them. About 50 were dying every day."

Abdol-Rahimi's photographs are perhaps the most complete account of the catastrophe. But his work was never recognized or published. He died last year at age 83, recalling until the end, his friends say, the morning he woke to find the refugee ships in port.

In all, 2,806 refugees died within a few months of arriving and were buried in cemeteries around Iran. Their alien names and the dates on their tombstones chronicle a calamity, even to a visitor without knowledge of their history. Etched on row after row of identical tombstones is a single year of death: 1942.

The majority of the arrivals--men, women and children as young as 14--signed up for the new Polish army led by Gen. Wladyslaw Anders, which compiled a distinguished combat record fighting alongside the British, Americans and other Allies. For the rest, new lives began with a bus journey to refugee camps in Tehran, Isfahan and several other cities.

"The friendly Persian people crowded round the buses shouting what must have been words of welcome and pushed gifts of dates, nuts, roasted peas with raisins and juicy pomegranates through the open windows," wrote Krystyna Skwarko, a schoolteacher who came with her own two sick children to take charge of a growing orphanage in Isfahan.

Skwarko's book, "The Invited," recounts a journey from Anzali, through Persia and on to New Zealand, where she and 700 orphans were eventually resettled. She died in 1995.

More than 13,000 of the arrivals in Iran were children, many orphans whose parents had died on the way. In Russia, starving mothers had pushed their children onto passing trains to Iran in hopes of saving them.

Skwarko's impossible task was to wipe the scars of war from children who had been robbed of their childhood.

"I can never erase from memory the sight of an emaciated 14-year-old girl, standing apart from a newly arrived group, holding a tiny sister tightly in her arms, the smaller so thin that the skin of her arms and legs hung loosely, as on an old man," Skwarko wrote. "The older girl, Irenka Wozniak, whispered as I went up to her: 'I could manage to save only little Ewunia.' "

But with the heart-rending tales, there are happier accounts of parents who were reunited with their children.

Jewish orphans were cared for by a Jewish organization in Iran and later sent to Israel. Others went on to new lives in the United States, Britain, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and elsewhere.

Life in Camp Polonia

Few residents of Ahvaz in southwestern Iran remember how the downtown neighborhood known as Campulu got its name. It was once Camp Polonia, one of several camps built for the refugees in cities around Iran.

Like Camp Polonia, most signs of the Polish journey have faded. Boarding houses, hospitals, schools and orphanages built with Allied funds were used by the refugees for two years, but nothing remains to indicate their past.

The laughter, music and cigarette smoke of the Polonia bar and restaurant in downtown Tehran, where Allied servicemen mingled with Polish girls, is a distant memory, like the bright neon "Polonia" sign that once beckoned clients. The basement bar became a chocolate factory, and then the print shop it is today.

Behind the British Embassy, not far from the old Polonia, Polish prostitutes once attracted clients with their bright red head scarves, according to filmmaker Sinai. Shaved heads for the treatment of typhus were common among the refugees; the prostitutes adopted the scarves to advertise their trade.

Photographs of the time show smartly dressed Polish women in long skirts working as secretaries, peering through microscopes in laboratories or working as nurses.

"Polish maids were sought by well-to-do Iranian ladies who wanted to learn makeup and Western fashions from their servants, who often had better backgrounds and education than the employers themselves," said Sinai, who was born the year before the influx.

Many nights, Polish musicians organized soirees to raise money for fellow refugees. Theater and dance entertained those who could afford it. Even the poorest could revel in forgotten pleasures like clean beds, warmth, plentiful food and enough room to stretch their legs at night.

Sinai's "Lost Requiem" captures some of the spirit of those times. But like its name, the film is lost. It was never promoted and today is thought to be collecting dust somewhere in the vaults of Iran's state television.

Inquiries at the Embassy

Occasionally, letters arrive from abroad at the Polish Embassy in Tehran, inquiring about a parent or other relative buried in one of the graveyards. The embassy sends back photographs of the cemetery and grave.

The letters to the embassy, or to the cemetery itself, come from Britain, New Zealand, the United States--wherever the Polish refugees who passed through Iran have settled. Last year, a woman who was in Iran as a child came to visit her mother's grave.

The dozen or so Polish survivors in Iran are not close. They would rather forget the tragedy that binds them. Occasionally, they get together for Christmas at the embassy or at rare reunions.

Once they are gone, the grim cemeteries will remain the only footprints through Iran of the Poles' sad, forgotten journey.

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