

# Polish Museum and Archives in Australia

The Polish Museum and Archives in Australia was established in 1991 as an initiative of a number of people who saw the importance of collecting and preserving historical materials that reflected the individual and community life of Polish immigrants living in Australia. The organisation was incorporated in 1992.

The aims of the organisation are to:

- Collect and preserve documents, medals, objects, photographs and other materials that have historical significance to the Polish community and the wider community in Australia.
- Make materials available to members of the general public and academics for research and other activities, such as exhibitions.
- Work co-operatively with organisations that have similar goals.
- Publish reference materials and books about the history and experiences of Polish immigration to Australia.
- Seek support for the Polish Museum and Archive's activities from mainstream, government and non-profit organisations, and individuals.

## Current Activities and Projects

### Collections Project

The Polish Museum and Archives continually seeks significant objects, documents and photographs that relate to the story of Polish postwar migration experiences. It would be a lost opportunity to make our mark on the multicultural mosaic of Australia and for our own sense of cultural identity, if we were to lose these treasures, just because their true significance was not recognised at the time.

### Oral History Project

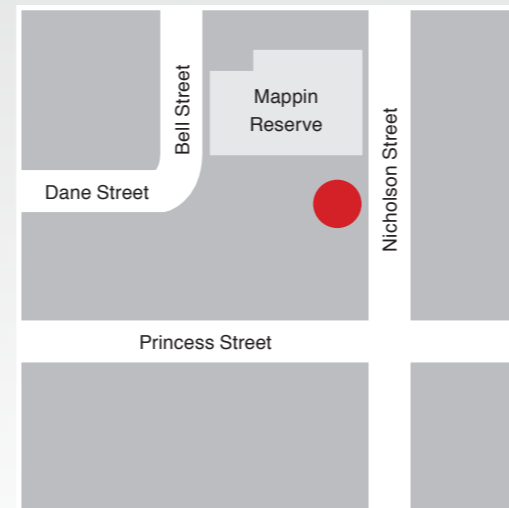
The postwar Polish immigrants are today our senior citizens. It is therefore important to document the experiences of these early pioneers. Such experiences include:

- Prewar life.
- War-time experiences.
- Early life in Australia – life in migrant hostels, the two-year work contracts.
- Establishing homes, community structures and cultural life.
- Reflections on Polish migrants' lives today.

It is vital that these stories be recorded and passed down to future generations of Polish Australians. They should also be documented as part of the greater multicultural Australian experience.

*An opportunity to view a multimedia snapshot of the Siberian exiles' odyssey from prewar Poland to survival in brutal conditions throughout the Soviet Union and then a life of exile scattered around the world.*

*It aims to inspire, promote and support research, remembrance and recognition of Polish citizens' struggles in the Eastern Borderlands and in Exile during and following World War II.*



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# “Fragments of Sibirak Memory”



# Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum

The Kresy-Siberia Foundation – [www.Kresy-siberia.org](http://www.Kresy-siberia.org) – was established to research, remember and recognise Polish citizens' World War II fight for freedom and survival under enemy occupation and in exile, with a special focus on Eastern Poland ("Kresy wschodnie").

Founded in Sydney in 2001 as an internet e-mail discussion group by Stefan Wisniowski, son of a Sybirak, Kresy-Siberia formally became a foundation in 2008. It is headquartered in Warsaw and operates throughout the world, and is a registered charity in Australia.

The group's world-wide membership of over 1,000 includes survivors and their children as well as experts in Polish history, writers, and archivists. The group is multi-ethnic and multi-religious, reflecting Poland's prewar multicultural nature.

Kresy-Siberia launched its Virtual Museum on 17 September 2009, with simultaneous ceremonies in Sydney, Warsaw, London and Toronto, on the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Soviet invasion of 17 September 1939. At the core of the Foundation, the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum serves not only to preserve the group's collections, but also includes the collections and scholarly works of many individual historians, active research institutes and archives around the world. It acts as a very accessible window into this poorly known history and as a base for the development of educational programs.

The Virtual Museum is partnered with the Hoover Institution at Stanford, USA, the Pilsudski Institute of New York, the Polish Army Museum in Warsaw, the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw, the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, the Memorial Society in Moscow, and organisations such as the Association of Borderland Settlers, the Polish Combatants Association and the Zwiasek Sybirakow in Wroclaw, Poland.

## Wall of Names

The wall records over 40,000 people so far, preserving their memory and the stories of Polish citizens and their heroic struggles outside the borders of present-day Poland. It includes both those who survived and those who perished. In order to submit someone's name and information, please visit the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum at [www.kresy-siberia.org](http://www.kresy-siberia.org) and fill out the online form.

## Hall of testimonies

The "Hall of Testimonies"—contains video clips from over 600 interviews recorded with survivors or obtained from archives. It tells the individual stories of people's repressions, deportations and fight for freedom from exile.

## 29 Public Galleries

Eight are already open and provide a professionally curated historical context stretching from prewar Kresy through World War II to the present. Coming galleries will be about General Anders Army, evacuated 70 years ago from the USSR, and about the Santa Rosa refugee colony in Mexico. By the end of the year we will have an English overview of all 29 Galleries.



## Hall of Memories

The Hall of Memories will be launched soon, and will contain over 8,600 photos and documents from private collections and from Siberian Association and other archives.

## Historical Context

On September 17, 1939, two weeks after Hitler's attack on Poland, Stalin invaded her from the East. This was the result of a secret protocol of the Molotov Pact, which divided Poland between Germany and Russia – for all intents and purposes forever.

Although the date itself is known to some in the West, most are not aware of the consequences of the invasion. These include not only of the arrest and murder by Stalin's NKVD of 25,000 Polish officers, in what has become known as the 'Katyn massacre' (a crime to which this day no one has been brought to justice!), but also the deportation, in cattle trucks, of 1.7 million Polish civilians - including Jews, Byelorussians, and Ukrainians - for slave labour in Siberia and Northern Kazakhstan.

They worked at back-breaking jobs – in mines, quarries, poverty-stricken collective farms, forests felling trees – regardless of age or standard of health. They lived in lice-infested primitive barracks, stables, and chicken huts. Braving inhuman climatic conditions, they were repeatedly told by their Soviet guards that this was to be their life forever, and that Poland had ceased to exist as a state.

Paradoxically they were saved by Hitler's attack on Russia. Churchill persuaded Stalin to release these Polish prisoners, and allowed them to join the fight against the Nazis. From the remotest corners of Russia, hundreds of thousands of survivors made their way out of the camps. Emaciated and bedraggled by diseases such as malaria, typhus, and dysentery, they left behind a trail of Polish graves. Out of the deported 1.7 million, less than one third (500,000) are known to have survived.

By August 1942, about 74,000 troops and 42,000 of their families crossed the Caspian Sea to Persia, where they were warmly received by the British and American armies. They were fed, clothed and trained as soldiers, after which they went on to fight for their country and for the Allied cause under British command. Despite their valour, however, their fate was no longer in their hands.

After the discovery of the Katyn grave, Stalin claimed to be 'offended' by the Polish insistence on the independent investigation, and broke off diplomatic relations with the Polish government. From that point on, Poland's future lay in the hands of her Western Allies.

This was a delicate matter for the Allies. Overnight, Stalin had turned into a badly needed ally that could not be antagonised. He demanded that 48% of Poland, occupied by the Red Army in an act of aggression, should become part of the Soviet Union. As early as in 1943 in Teheran, Churchill and Roosevelt gave in to his demands – without the knowledge or participation of the Polish Government. The Poles were not even informed about that decision, lest it broke their fighting spirit.

Ignorant of their fate, the free Polish army continued to fight with the Allies, over 48,000 losing their lives on Western battlefields. The Teheran decision was officially confirmed at Yalta, and consequently left the Poles homeless. They scattered all over the world, over 110,000 settling in Britain and others in countries such as Australia, Canada and the USA.

The survivors of this ordeal have never received either compensation or an apology. To this day they have lived in the Allied countries for which they had risked their lives, and which have refused to recognise their experiences and suffering.

This was by no means through their lack of trying. According to Professor Norman Davies, one of a handful of historians who has honestly covered this aspect of the war, all the attempts to tell this story have been actively blocked by government authorities, especially in Britain.

Today these old Polish survivors are passing away, bitter not as much about the wartime pragmatism of which they were victims, but about having been consigned to oblivion by the Western democracies they fought to preserve from the Nazi menace.

The Polish refugee families from Siberia spent the rest of the war in temporary camps in Iran, Palestine, Africa, India, New Zealand and Mexico. After the war, most soldiers in the Army of the Polish 2nd Republic settled in England along with the refugee families. Some of them went on to resettle in Canada, the United States, South America, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia.

## What now?

The harshness of the life of these Polish soldiers and refugees before arriving in the West is not fully realised or adequately documented. The stories of survival of those in the group who were deported from Poland, to work in remote labour camps in the Soviet Union, are nothing short of remarkable. It is imperative for our history, and the broader record of human endeavour and endurance, that these stories be told.

## What can I do to help?

### Contribute your stories

Kresy-Siberia needs support from the Polish and broader community in Australia to continue the important work of preserving and promoting this unique history. It needs survivors and their families to share their photos and documents, it needs survivors to come forward and record their testimonies; and it needs volunteers to get involved with its work.

### Donate. It's tax deductible

Finally, Kresy-Siberia needs tax-deductible donations to support this work. Suggested support level are \$40 Friend, \$100 Bronze donor, \$500 Silver donor, and \$2500 Gold donor. You can pay by bank transfer to BSB 012-265 Account 1821-08409, pay by PayPal or credit card at [www.tinyurl.com/KRESY-SIBERIA-AU](http://www.tinyurl.com/KRESY-SIBERIA-AU), or pay by cheque to the order of "Kresy-Siberia" and post to 3 Castle Circuit Close, Seaforth, NSW 2092 Australia.

