

## War and Resettlement: Polish Resettlement Camps in the UK after the Second World War. The experience of creating a settlement policy for Polish political refugees

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### Abstract

The subject domain of this paper is Polish immigration to post-War Britain. It portrays the Polish community's rehabilitation in exile and the British government's creation of a model migrant settlement policy for Polish refugees after 1946. It explains how Poles successfully integrated into mainstream British society and highlights the importance of education as their route to civic integration.

The research leading to this paper examined the political implications of the passage of the Polish Resettlement Bill in March 1947 (the first ever British legislation dealing with mass immigration) and how the original refugees formed much of the Polish community as it exists today.

The exceptional aspects of this legislation in terms of modern British refugee policy lay in its clauses relating to the Polish refugees' entitlement to government support in key areas of social life. Major government departments were assigned special duties linked to the management, organization and support of this group of immigrants. Each of them took different responsibilities.

A good deal of this paper is dedicated to the creation of the Polish Resettlement Camps in Britain in 1946. At the end of the Second World War the British Government offered hospitality to Polish soldiers who had served under British command and who were unable or unwilling to return to their native country. Wives and dependents were brought to Britain to join the soldiers, bringing the total estimated number to over 250,000.

Former army and air force camps were utilised as temporary accommodation for the Polish troops and their families.

In due course, the Poles emerged as dedicated contributors to the rebuilt British economy. In the workplace they have always been seen by Britons as hard-working and reliable employees. Those who obtained secondary or higher education found profitable and prestigious posts in the British labour market and made successful professional careers. Children of Polish descent, who were born, brought up and educated in the reality of the resettlement camps or hostels have engaged in professional careers and made their Polish names recognizable in a rapidly diversifying British society.

Polish refugees became one of the most prosperous immigrant groups in Great Britain and the Polish minority constitutes one of the largest ethnic groups in the UK today.

### Keywords

exile, forced migration, resettlement, migration policies, education and integration

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## 1. Disrupted life courses – Poles in the UK after the end of WW2

Post-war Polish immigration to Britain was one repercussion of the Second World War. After the invasion of France in June 1940, the exiled Polish government was evacuated to Great Britain. Only 19,457 military evacuees reached England, less than a quarter of the total based earlier in France. However, a significant number of Poles continued arriving in Great Britain with the Polish armed forces in and after 1940. These soldiers, sailors, and airmen had served under British command and had made a vital contribution to the Allied war effort. Poles formed the fourth-largest Allied armed force and were the largest group of non-British personnel in the RAF during the Battle of Britain. Their most famous contribution was to the victory in the Battle of Britain, where the 303 Polish Squadron was the highest-scoring (shooting down German aeroplanes) Polish RAF unit fighting to save Britain.<sup>1</sup> Though perhaps even more crucial was the Polish involvement in the field of intelligence. Between September 1939 and May 1945, 48 per cent of all reports generated by the British Intelligence had come from Polish sources covering a wide range of events engaging enemies throughout the entire the War.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, such a victorious army had lost the War. The tragic end for Poland was officially confirmed during the Yalta Conference in February 1945. The Polish Government-in-Exile was bitterly disillusioned by the agreement among the allies that ended the War. Half of Poland's pre-war territory was incorporated into the Soviet Union. This was followed by the recognition of the pro-Soviet Committee of Liberation in Poland. Poles felt utterly betrayed and abandoned by their allies.<sup>3</sup> The Polish military contribution to the Allies' victory seemed to be forgotten.

It was evident that Soviet supremacy, confirmed at Yalta in February 1945, would leave thousands of Polish people as political refugees (without any political rights regarding their status) of whom would wish to take advantage of possible re-settlement in Britain. The uncertainty of Poland's future and the loss of vast swathes of territory in the eastern part of the country, left the Poles with no other choice than exile. For many émigrés, living in Communist Poland seemed a bleak prospective, clearly worse than the prospect of staying in Britain even on a temporary basis.<sup>4</sup>

Staying in Britain or its dependent territories seemed to Poles, whether in Britain already or under British command elsewhere, to be the only viable option for their future. The British Government found itself faced with the responsibility for the Polish political refugees. As it transpired, this challenge was a new experience for the British authorities.

Although Poland was the first country to oppose Hitler, fighting with great dedication and remaining loyal to the Western powers, at the end of the war Poles faced a bitter 'defeat in victory'.<sup>5</sup> General Władysław Anders in his letter to President Raczkiwicz<sup>6</sup> called the Yalta decisions a terrible injustice.<sup>7</sup>

This study seeks to present the experience of the creating a settlement policy and the process of passing the first immigration law, the Polish Resettlement Act in March 1947 which aim to embrace the Polish political refugees into the British society after WW2.

There is no doubt that both the effective settlement of a refugee community and their contribution to the host society depend on the ability of policy-makers and service-providers to understand the community's needs during the process of being accepted into the host community. It is hoped that the narratives of this paper will, to a large extent, furnish some understanding of how, for the first time in the history of immigration into the United Kingdom, a particular support system came into being and how it functioned.

This paper presents sample reports illustrating the experience of involuntary migration and resettlement. It seeks both to complement existing research and to provide an original contribution to associated debates in several areas of migrant settlement studies as conducted on an interdisciplinary basis within history and sociology.

Above all, it emphasizes the importance and complexity of immigration in the history of Great Britain, particularly after the Second World War. Newcomers arriving in Britain transformed the country forever; immigrants affected every sphere of British life. Poles may not have had the greatest impact on everyday life in Britain society, but they were the first to arrive en masse. Britain was on the verge of an era of considerable population increase based largely

1 A number of Polish pilots who scored (shot down) German military aeroplanes during the Battle of Britain. In total, 139 Poles fought in the Battle of Britain and they gained a reputation for aggressive aerial combat. By the time the Battle of Britain had ended, the Poles had shot down around twenty percent of all Luftwaffe aircraft.

2 M. Stella-Sawicki's introductory speech at the International Military Conference at the Polish Embassy of the Republic of Poland in London on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2016.

3 The decisions taken at Yalta were called a new partition of Poland. The Polish Government-in-Exile created a special commission (Tarnowski, Berezowski, Pragier) with responsibility for responding to the Yalta decisions. The Foreign Office refused to broadcast the text of this protest on the wireless. See Władysław Pobóg Malinowski, *Najnowasza Historia Polityczna Polski. Okres 1939-45*, Gdańsk, 1990, p. 426.

4 Peter Stachura, *The Poles in Britain. 1940 – 2000. From Betrayal to Assimilation*, London 2004, p.15.

5 Wojciech Roszkowski, *The Shadow of Yalta. A Report*, Warsaw 2006, p. 88.

6 Władysław Raczkiwicz (1885–1947) was the first President of the Polish Government-in-Exile from 1939 until his death in 1947. Until 1945 he was the internationally recognized Polish head of state.

7 W. Pobóg-Malinowski, *Op.Cit.*, p. 430.

on immigration, with the Poles leading the way. After 1945, 3.2 million immigrants arrived in the United Kingdom, accounting for about 6 per cent of the population, more than at any time in modern British history. Accepting Poles unconditionally as long-term guests or even as fellow citizens was a complicated matter both socially and politically. Post-war economic hardship and British political affairs played a major part in how Poles were perceived in political circles and outside Whitehall.

Another principle aim of this paper is to examine the political and social implications of the passing of the Polish Resettlement Act in March 1947, and how the original refugees formed much of the Polish community as it exists today. The Act offered hospitality to Polish soldiers (and their wives and dependents) who had served under British command and who were unable or unwilling to return to their native country. It regulated the resettlement of Poles and became Britain's first ever mass immigration legislation.

The key argument of this paper focusses on the outcome of the creation of the successful migration policies refugee law, and hospitable practices when welcoming foreign citizens. It demonstrates that by providing adequate resources and responding positively to the refugees' needs, the integration process can be significantly eased and could lead to the successful experience in pursuing the creation of the migration policies, as it transpires on the example of the Polish immigrants.<sup>8</sup>

A good deal of the work linked to this Act involved the creation of the Polish Resettlement Camps in 1946.

Despite the importance of this element of "refugee studies", scholarly research into the resettlement camps for Polish refugees is still in its infancy. There has been no academic work dedicated solely to the topic. To counter this, an attempt is made here to present some of the experiences of Polish immigrants living in the camps and so to explore the origins of the settlement of the Polish refugee community.

Based on the existing secondary literature described below, it can be confidently asserted that any attempt to research and assess the importance of the establishment, activity and, finally, the consequences of the existence of the Polish Resettlement Camps (PRC) in the United Kingdom, cannot build on any substantial corpus of previous research. Apart from the existence of personal memoirs and diaries written by Polish refugees and former camp residents, little or no resource material relating to the camps has been discovered.<sup>9</sup>

Only limited attention is paid in this paper to episodes that have been fully researched in a number of previous studies. By contrast, and for a variety of reasons, chief among which was limited access to the original documentation, the origins and the role of the Polish Resettlement Camps has been largely overlooked.

Undeniably, the wealth of original material unearthed in the course of the present project has been crucial to the validity of this study. The large number of original documents available in the National Archives in Kew has been used here for the first time. It is to be hoped that this article will be a sampler from which a more informed judgement on the British approach towards the Polish people after the war may begin to emerge.

This paper explores the themes of the forced migration, exile and resettlement of the Polish community after WW2. It falls into five sections. First two sections explain the political repercussions of World War II for Poland and the reasons behind the Polish immigration to the United Kingdom. The third section describes the creation of the Polish Resettlement Camps across the country and the administrative and sociological issues encountered arising from the resettlement process. The fourth part examines the institutions and structures created by the British authorities to manage the unprecedented influx of Poles. It also explains the process leading to the passing of the Polish Resettlement Act and the institution of the Committee for the Education of Poles in spring 1947 as an exemplar for the creation of a settlement policy and refugee legislation. The following part highlights the complexity of the integration process, the importance of education as the paramount tool to this end and the value of building social bonds with the host community. Furthermore, this section emphasizes how significant it was that the Polish community cultivated their cultural and educational heritage in exile alongside the policies leading to integration being introduced by the British government. Finally, the paper summarises the experience of the creation of a settlement policy as applied to the Polish political refugees who found themselves in post-war Britain.

<sup>8</sup> Agata Blaszczyk, *The Resettlement of Polish refugees after the Second World War in: Forced Migration Review, Resettlement*, Issue 54, February 2017, p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> *Education in Exile* [Ministry of Education, London, 1956] is the only documentary source on the Committee for the Education of Poles (CEP) and the Polish Resettlement Camps (PRC). It was published by the Ministry of Education in 1956 after the Committee was wound up in 1954. Set out in chronological order, this fifty-page brochure briefly explains the history of the educational institutions set up by Poles in exile. It also emphasises the British government's efforts geared towards assisting Polish refugees after their resettlement in Britain. While this modest publication contains much detailed information, it nonetheless does no more than present the Committee's accomplishments as seen through the eyes of the civil servant producing the report. It is, however, well documented and lays due stress on the importance of the Committee and the enormous efforts made by the government agencies involved in the project. It cites a number of government reports, but offers little or no critical analysis of them. Hence the picture of the PRC and CEP presented in it is somewhat upbeat.

## 2. The withdrawal of British recognition of the Polish Government-in-Exile. Polish Resettlements Corps

Following the confirmation of the new Polish borders, it soon became apparent to the British government that the issue of Polish servicemen and civilians entering Great Britain was a significant political problem. The British government had to recognize that the Poles had stood by their Western Allies and their future was in the hands of British authorities. Finding a suitable solution was a difficult matter and delicate for the British Government. The bulk of the government correspondence examined expresses the fear that the Polish Question 'bristles with enormous potentialities of future trouble'.<sup>10</sup>

The future of the Polish people was high on the agenda of the British Government. During the Yalta Debate in the House of Commons on 27 February 1945, the Prime Minister, Winston Spencer Churchill, made an extraordinary statement:

His Majesty's Government recognize that the large forces of Polish troops – soldiers, sailors and airmen – now fighting gallantly, as they have fought during the whole year, under British command, owe allegiance to the Polish Government in London. (...)

In any event His Majesty's Government will never forget the debt they owe to the Polish troops and for all those who have fought under our command I earnestly hope it may be possible to offer citizenship and freedom of the British Empire should they so desire. I am not able to make any declaration on that subject today because all matters affecting citizenship require to be discussed between this country and the Dominions [...], but so far as we are concerned, we should think it an honour to have such faithful and valiant warriors dwelling among us as if they were men of our own blood.<sup>11</sup>

This would later be called Churchill's 'pledge'. It would ultimately lead to offering refugee status to Polish soldiers.

On 6 March 1945, in a speech to the House of Commons, Churchill confirmed his intention that if all else failed, he would offer the Poles safe accommodation within the British Empire. During the next few months the government drew up the necessary plans. As shown by the records, the "Polish Question" was a 'special case' in British politics, but still awaited formal clarification and legislation. Indeed, "for the first time ever, a major group of immigrants would be formally welcomed, embraced and given assistance."<sup>12</sup> Legislation such as this was not used for other refugee groups. This itself was evidence enough of the importance of the Poles on the national political agenda at the time and of what the British government was capable of achieving, given the political will.

One of the important themes concerned British relations with the Soviet Union in areas where British and Soviet interests clashed, most notably over Polish affairs during and after the war. British foreign policy towards the Soviets was based on an understandable reluctance to upset or to provoke their Soviet ally; this was emphasised by one scholar who stated: "(...) the British policy was one of determination to avoid both appeasement and unnecessary provocation in dealings with the Soviet Union."<sup>13</sup> Long-term peaceful relations with the Soviets were regarded as desirable. This attitude clearly surfaced during the Yalta and Potsdam conferences and continued after the war. Thus, reaching a settlement with the Soviet Union and keeping it secure for the sake of a speedy end to the Second World War remained the prime object of Allied policy.<sup>14</sup> Creating the Polish Resettlement Corps, passing the Polish Resettlement Act, and the consequent institution of the Committee for the Education of Poles caused an inevitable stir in British–Soviet relations. These and related findings could only have surfaced through access to documents only recently made available to researchers.

On 5 July 1945, the British Government formally withdrew its recognition of the exiled Polish Government in London.<sup>15</sup> It acted as the only representation of Poles, both in Poland and abroad. Poles felt utterly betrayed and abandoned by their allies.<sup>16</sup> The political situation placed the Poles in absolute dependency on their British hosts. Pressure from the United States to recognize the new Communist-dominated government in Warsaw forced London to take steps to alleviate the Poles' situation.<sup>17</sup> It became clear that the "Polish Question" had to be handled in a very delicate and

10 Letter from the High Commissioner for the Union of South Africa dated 1 March 1945, FO371/51177, Refugees, File no 384 1945 PRO – The National Archives, Kew-Richmond, p. 1.

11 'The question of British nationality for Polish soldiers, sailors and airmen.' Memorandum by the Home Secretary, dated 5 March 1945, London, FO371/51177, PRO – The National Archives, Kew-Richmond, p.1.

12 Robert Winder, *Bloody Foreigners. The Story of Immigration to Britain*, London, 2005, p. 323.

13 Victor Rothwell, *Britain and the Cold War 1941–1947*, London 1982, p. 19.

14 Alan Bullock, Ernest Bevin. *Foreign Secretary 1945–1951*, London 1983, p. 30.

15 Edward Raczyński's letter, 5 July 1945, Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, Kol.417/58.

16 The decisions taken at Yalta were called a new partition of Poland. The Polish Government-in-Exile created a special commission (Tarnowski, Berezowski, Pragier) with responsibility for responding to the Yalta decisions. The Foreign Office refused to broadcast the text of this protest on the wireless. See Władysław Pobóg Malinowski, *Najnowasza Historia Polityczna Polski. Okres 1939-45*, Gdańsk, 1990, p. 426.

17 Letter from Cadogan to General Brooke dated 3 July 1945, FO37147667 (N8207), PRO – The National Archives, Kew-Richmond.

tactful way.

Increasing numbers of Polish individuals, whether from Communist-controlled Poland or from the Middle East and Africa, arrived in Britain, in fall 1946. The movement of Polish forces had commenced a few days after Bevin's announcement of the organization of the Polish Resettlement Corps in May 1946.<sup>18</sup> The Corps was established by the British Government as a holding unit for members of the Polish Armed Forces. Between 1946 to 1949, wives and dependants were brought to Britain to join them, bringing the estimated total of Poles in Britain to over 249,000.<sup>19</sup> By the end of September 1946, the British finalised the transfer of the Second Polish Army Corps onto British Isles. General Anders left Italy on 31 October 1946 with the last transport of regular soldiers, making an emotional note in his diary that they were all going not home, but into exile.<sup>20</sup>

Along with his troops, Anders brought to Britain the entire machinery of well-organized and functioning civilian life with hospitals, schools, a press, canteens, theatres and welfare services. Extraordinarily, this exile group launched its life in a new country equipped with a ready-made set of organizations and associations, which would flourish as soon as the war ended. In his eyes it was crucial to preserve these forms of organized life among the soldiers and their dependants. These groups of people, along with the Poles already living in the Britain, could not be ignored by the British Government. In fact, a new life for the newly created Polish community had already been born, behind the "political curtain."

As Sheila Patterson and Keith Sword have noted, the stopovers in the Middle East and Italy contributed greatly to the creation of a Polish 'little exiled world', where under the care of the army, Polish school, press and cultural life flourished.<sup>21</sup> This community under its guardian of Commander General Anders would later become the core of the Polish Diaspora in Great Britain.<sup>22</sup>

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18 On 22 May 1946, after consultations held with General Anders and Prime Minister Attlee, Bevin revealed his plans for the demobilization of Polish forces to the House of Commons. The new arrangement applied to those serving overseas, starting with the troops in Italy, who were to be brought to Britain. In order to help these soldiers start their life anew on British soil, it had been decided to enrol them in the previously mentioned resettlement corps. The Polish Resettlement Corps was set up specifically to help Polish troops who did not want to return to Poland, wishing instead to stay in Britain and settle into civilian life there. The term of service in the Corps was to be two years. It was agreed with the trade unions that prospective Polish employees could only be recruited from the PRC and would be placed in 'approved' Ministry of Labour jobs. Members of the Corps were still considered to be military personnel and subject to British military discipline and military law. They were accommodated in military camps and paid at the normal British Armed Forces rate for their rank. Service in the Corps was intended to be an opportunity for retraining and education. Naturally, learning the English language and gaining basic training and practical qualifications became important factors in the process of preparing soldiers for a new life, whether in the United Kingdom or abroad.

19 K. Sword, N. Davies, J. Ciechanowski, Op. Cit., p.446 and Jerzy Zubrzycki, Op. Cit., p. 58

20 Wladyslaw Anders, *An Army in Exile. The Story of the Second Polish Corps*, London 1949, p.304.

21 The Polish Armed Forces in the West fought in most Allied operations against Nazi Germany in the Middle East, Mediterranean, African and European theatres: the North African campaign, the Italian Campaign (with the Battle of Monte Cassino – one the most remarkable achievement of the, the Western European Campaign).

22 Sheila Patterson, Polish London, in R. Glass et al. (eds), London. Aspects of Change, London, 1964, pp. 309-43. Also K. Sword, Op. Cit., p. 24.

### 3. Everyday life in the Polish Resettlement Camps – inspectors' reports

#### 3.1 Inspections at the camps – West Chiltington and Petworth

Along with finalizing the main objectives for the future Committee for the Education of Poles, preparations for the first inspections inside the Polish camps had commenced. This was a crucial part of the resettlement process, which aimed to identify conditions in the Displaced Persons camps as well as the educational provisions for the Polish refugees.

By October 1946, around 120,000 Polish troops were quartered in 265 camps throughout Great Britain, mainly in former British, American or Canadian military camps. 160 camps were for the Second Corps and its dependants scattered all over the country.<sup>23</sup> At the beginning, it was the War Office which took responsibility for these Polish Displaced Persons Camps; later, from 1947, the Assistance Board began to administer the camps.

Inspections at the camps were also intended to find out more about the morale and atmosphere among the Poles, particularly the young. For the British Government, officials visiting camps became a vital part of the process of creating a settlement policy for the Polish refugees.

Two refugee camps, where the greatest numbers of youngsters were housed, were visited. These were: West Chiltington, near Pullborough, in Sussex with 138 girls and nearby Petworth with 192 boys. Inspectors were recruited from the Home Office Children's Branch and Ministry of Health.<sup>24</sup>

The camps at West Chiltington and Petworth were home to several hundred inhabitants. They included Polish soldiers and civilians. Among the civilians, there were a few married couples, married women awaiting an opportunity to be housed with their husbands, and women and men waiting to be released from the camp to take up employment. There were also 65 children of all ages up to 18 who had parents, but not always living in the same camp, about 190 boys (at Petworth Camp), and 140 girls at West Chiltington Camp aged 8-23, mostly adolescents.

As observed earlier, both camps were of a war-time emergency type which had been previously occupied by Canadian and American troops. They were situated about 2–3 miles from the nearest village or town, but were accessible by local bus services. They consisted of huts of the Nissen type, equipped with electric lights, heated by slow combustion stoves, but had poor natural ventilation and light. They were scattered through a wooded area and, apart from a few main paths, were not connected in any way by concrete pavements or covered walkways.

Sanitary facilities were found to be of a crude and primitive type and were housed in central huts or blocks which were not, in the inspectors' opinion, suitable for civilians. Hot water was available on one or two days a week. Furthermore, huts like those in the West Chiltington Camp, were heated only three or four days a week, which gave the inspectors particular cause for concern:

(...) It is appreciated that the inhabitants spend most of their time in their own huts and thus they should be adequately warmed.

[...] The proper washing facilities for clothes were non-existent in the Boys' Camp and were of a primitive type in the Girls' camp. The provision of hot water, anyhow on only one or two days of the week, rendered such washing of clothes an almost impossible task.<sup>25</sup>

In the inspectors' opinion, the main common problem for all the residents, but particularly young people, was that of acquiring an adequate knowledge of English in order to be able to meet the normal needs of everyday life. At both camps, there was a secondary school; however its curriculum was geared to preparing these young people to pass a Polish university entrance examination in Polish. Consequently, they would not have been able to gain admission to British universities. In addition, the poor standard of teaching and a lack of any obvious methodology caught the inspectors' attention. Unsurprisingly, the teaching and schooling equipment came under severe criticism:

The books available for instruction are very few and seemed very out of date according to our standards. Most of the teachers did not impress either in respect of their actual teaching or teaching methods, but this is difficult to judge in another language. One point was very clear: there was practically no correction of work done in class for homework. This may be due to lassitude on teachers' part; nevertheless it does not seem that a well-established teaching habit and responsibility could be completely absent in reasonably efficient teachers. If further employed for any purpose the staff needed to be vetted both for qualifications and general efficiency by someone qualified to judge them in their own language.<sup>26</sup>

23 See a list of these camps placed in Assistance Board file AST18/1; The National Archives, Kew-Richmond

24 Minute sheet signed by M. D. Clayton, Secretary, Polish Forces, Sub-Committee on Education dated 31 December 1946, ED128/141, PRO – The National Archives, Kew-Richmond

25 Polish Camps at West Chiltington and Petworth visited in January 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> 1947, by Miss Cowper, H.M.I., and Miss Glyn-Jones, Inspector of Children's Branch, H.O., and on January 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> by Dr. Boucher, Ministry of Health, ED128/141, PRO – The National Archives, Kew-Richmond, p. 2

26 Polish Camps at West Chiltington and Petworth visited in January 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> 1947, by Miss Cowper, H.M.I., and Miss Glyn-Jones,

The inspectors underlined the fact that the boys had learnt more English than the girls, except for those girls who had been in the American zone and picked up a little more. However, the girls did clearly understand that their success in life depended on quickly mastering the English language. Their attitude towards preparing for their future jobs was not as realistic or as well defined as the boys. Furthermore, discussions on girls' future occupations showed that apart from those who were waiting to continue towards matriculation, most interest was shown in the needlework trades, and to a degree in child care. A number of girls who had previously been in forced labour in agriculture expressed an evident desire to return to these jobs.

Boys, on the other hand, particularly the two top classes coming from well-educated families expressed a wish to enter specialised occupations and professions: engineering, the services or draughtsmanship. They appeared to be suited to national Certificate or City and Guilds courses. Their attitude was down-to-earth and promising, and they were desperate to get a job and study at the same time:

On the whole they appeared to be good material mentally, both actual and potential, well worth salvaging and able to make a useful contribution to the community in this country. It seems clear that they will have to be dealt with as a separate unit in the initial stages because of their educational history and the lack of ability to understand and speak English. Both girls and boys were fairly alert and where their future was concerned their behaviour was courteous and helpful, and they appeared to be normal even to giggling a little on our exits. There did not seem to be any problem of discipline in the classes, though these were generally held in the mornings. There is no organised physical education or organised games.<sup>27</sup>

The inspectors' reports all agreed that there was no evidence of any serious disciplinary problems. It should be recalled that the aim of these inspections, apart from reporting on the objective conditions in the camps, was to consider the atmosphere and, more importantly, morale among the Poles.

It was particularly stressed that the boys' pasts and their difficult and violent experiences might have affected their mental health and their morale. That risk was especially high if their lives were not given an appropriate direction soon; otherwise they could end up on the margins of society, with the added risk of criminalisation.

Importantly, it became increasingly evident to the inspectors that the young girls and boys living in the camps would not be returning to Poland. They believed that these young Poles were highly likely to become good citizens, and according to their recommendations it would be a tragedy to neglect their potential value as citizens, particularly in Great Britain. Girls and boys alike required some basic guidance and help from the host society along with the social training, so they could blend smoothly into their new society.<sup>28</sup>

From the summary of the inspectors' report it was clear that there were severe shortages in many aspects of everyday life in the camps. There was a disturbing lack of space, privacy and teaching and training equipment. There were not enough English teachers to prepare the youngsters for life outside the camp. It was evident to the inspectors that most of the residents were not prepared to return to Poland. Clearly, life in exile, however under-provided for, had become the more attractive option. The refugees hoped that their predicament would be soon resolved and they were ready to accept uncomplainingly the temporary inconveniences in the camp.

Importantly, it became increasingly evident to the inspectors that these young people needed some form of stabilization and some basic guidance and help from the host society along with the social training, so that they could blend smoothly into their new society.<sup>29</sup>

In general, Polish exiles temporarily residing in the camps felt 'at home' in their local communities. Despite of difficulties associated with the everyday life in the resettlement camps, they felt secure, reassured and reasonably comfortable living in their temporary dwellings. A sense of personal safety remained paramount. Polish refugees clearly valued continuity after their post-war difficult journey and a sense of the existing community made them feel at ease. This would later become an important facilitator of integration.

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Inspector of Children's Branch, H.O., and on January 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> by Dr. Boucher, Ministry of Health, ED128/141, PRO – The National Archives, Kew-Richmond, p. 3.

27 Polish Camps at West Chilmington and Petworth visited in January 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> 1947, by Miss Cowper, H.M.I., and Miss Glyn-Jones, Inspector of Children's Branch, H.O., and on January 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> by Dr Boucher, Ministry of Health, ED128/141, PRO – The National Archives, Kew-Richmond, p.4

28 Polish Camps at West Chilmington and Petworth visited in January 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> 1947, by Miss Cowper, H.M.I., and Miss Glyn-Jones, Inspector of Children's Branch, H.O., and on January 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> by Dr Boucher, Ministry of Health, ED128/141, PRO – The National Archives, Kew-Richmond, p. 9

29 Polish Camps at West Chilmington and Petworth visited in January 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> 1947, by Miss Cowper, H.M.I., and Miss Glyn-Jones, Inspector of Children's Branch, H.O., and on January 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> by Dr Boucher, Ministry of Health, ED128/141, PRO – N.A, Kew-Richmond, p.9

#### 4. Passing the Polish Resettlement Act (March 1947) and setting up the Committee for the Education of Poles (1 April 1947)

On 27 March 1947, after several months of preparation and laborious effort by the British parliament, the Polish Resettlement Act was passed, providing entitlement to employment and to unemployment benefit in Britain. The Act laid out the responsibilities of several government departments for the employment, health and education of the Poles. The War Office had been responsible for the Polish Armed Forces; however, the Act now put the National Assistance Board in charge of the Polish Resettlement Camps. It also involved the Ministries of Labour, National Service and Education in care for the Poles.

Responsibility for the education of Poles in the United Kingdom was placed with the Ministry of Education and the Secretary of the State for Scotland. All expenses were to be defrayed out of monies provided by Parliament.<sup>30</sup> This was the first time in the history of migration to Great Britain that this kind of legislation was brought into being, directed uniquely at a refugee group. Never before had a major group of immigrants been formally welcomed and given such a range of assistance. The most important aspect of the Act remained clear: Poles were being treated differently from other groups. They figured as an important item on the national political agenda and were being unequivocally treated as a special case.

The exceptional aspects of this legislation in terms of modern British refugee policy lay in its clauses relating to the Polish refugees' entitlement to government support in key areas of social life. Major government departments were assigned special duties linked to the management, organization and support of this group of immigrants. Each of them took different responsibilities. The Assistance Board was to provide accommodation in camps, hostels or other establishments for Poles. It was also put in charge of making payments to sundry categories of Poles in need. Provisions within the Ministry of Health referred to health care of de-mobbed Poles and their dependants. The Ministry of Pensions became responsible for making payments to individuals in consequence of the death or disablement of members of the Polish forces while under British command. The Ministry of Labour was responsible for making arrangements for the emigration of Polish civilians.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the Ministry of Education took charge of educational services.

The Polish Resettlement Act was welcomed in the House of Commons and considered to be an 'act of great statesmanship on the part of this country' that changed attitudes to the foreigners then arriving in Britain.<sup>32</sup> It was Britain's first immigration law. The Resettlement Act enabled Poles to settle in Britain and thus potentially provide the requisite labour force. They and their descendants continue to make up a large part of the Polish British community as it exists today.

On 1 April 1947, the Ministry of Education and the Secretary of the State for Scotland decided to use the powers given them under the Act to delegate their responsibilities for Polish education in Great Britain and accordingly they set up the Committee for the Education of Poles. The Committee's principal aim was stressed in its memorandum: 'To fit them (Poles) for absorption into British schools and British careers whilst still maintaining provision for their natural desire for the maintenance of Polish culture and the knowledge of Polish History and Literature.'<sup>33</sup> Bringing the Committee to life was another milestone on the path leading to the stabilization of the lives of Polish refugees after the war. It was also a significant and decisive step in creating and implementing a migration policy for the Polish community already living in Great Britain.<sup>34</sup>

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30 The Polish Resettlement Bill, ED128/143, PRO – N.A, Kew-Richmond.

31 Polish Resettlement Bill – Clauses 1-10, ED128/143, PRO – N.A, Kew-Richmond

32 *Hansard (Commons)*, vol. 433, 424 – 432, p.404

33 Report of the Chairman of the Committee for the Education of Poles in Great Britain March 1948, ED 128/9, PRO – N.A., Kew-Richmond, p.2; also Committee for the Education of the Poles in Great Britain, Memorandum from the Minister of Education and the Secretary of the state for Scotland, ED128/146, PRO – N.A., Kew-Richmond, pp. 1-2. Also in *Education in exile*. Ministry of Education, ED128/10, PRO – N.A., Kew-Richmond, London 1956, p. 11-12.

Report on the Curriculum and Staffing of the Committee's Polish Schools, 13 July 1948, ED128/5, PRO – N.A., Kew-Richmond, p.3.

34 No specific study on the extent of the Committee's work, or the full scope of its achievements, has so far come to light. This is rather surprising, given that expenditure of the order of £9 million (Equivalent to £29 million in 2012) was authorized on education across all levels and that, thanks to this, it proved possible not only to maintain Polish schools and educate many young Poles, but also to achieve the educational goals that the émigré Polish community had set itself at the end of the War.

## 5. Understanding integration – the importance of education, building social bonds and social bridges. Cultivating Polish cultural and educational heritage

### 5.1 The importance of education as the route to civic integration - Teaching English at Stowell Park Secondary – school reports

As mentioned earlier, the British government attached great importance to the need to integrate the Poles (children and young people were crucial players in the process) into British society as quickly as possible. Education became an eminently useful tool in this process. Acquisition of English became the basic step to be taken in pursuit of this ambitious plan.

Reports from the secondary school situated in Stowell Park encapsulate the whole range of problems relating to the above issues.

According to these documents, Polish teachers did successfully acquire a knowledge of English sound enough for them to be able to teach their own subjects through the medium of English. English teachers, on the other hand, developed the girls' interests in many other subjects, especially those related to adapting the girls to the British way of life. Visits to the theatre at Stratford-on-Avon and Cheltenham were regular features of their school life. In order to provide the girls with some outside diversion, the Headmaster would invite local young men along to bridge the gap between the school and members of the local British community:

At Christmas, our Headmaster would sometimes invite British people. I remember dancing 'Zasiali górale owies, owies' (a traditional Polish dance) with an English partner, who was quite plump and whose round face turned red. He showed great enthusiasm when we were dancing, and he very happily waved his arms and legs about, whispering: "Nice, very nice." He then confessed that never before had he enjoyed himself so much.<sup>35</sup>

This girls' tremendous enthusiasm and determination and the teachers' hard work eventually ended with the girls' acquiring a much better knowledge of English. As the years passed, their ability to write and speak in English improved by leaps and bounds, even in the older girls:

I completed my education when I was 19. I benefited most from Miss W.'s lessons. We had to memorize 20 words a day and be able to explain their meaning and use. Multiplied by five lessons per week, this significantly improved my English. After I graduated from Secretarial College, throughout the subsequent years of my working life, I was able to correct my colleagues' spelling, including that of my managers. One day, one of my bosses screamed: "Bloody foreigners, they come to this country... take our jobs... marry our women... and correct our spelling..."<sup>36</sup>

There were many other happier stories, like the one above, illustrating the girls' achievements in their various vocations and professions. Some of them found office work; some were rewarded with university scholarships, and some became teachers or accountants.<sup>37</sup>

There is no doubt that here the Committee had achieved its object, enabling many Polish adolescents to secure their lives and merge smoothly into their new communities.<sup>38</sup>

For various reasons, not every Polish émigré who entered Britain in 1946 was quite so fortunate. The first generation's experience of settling down and starting their life from scratch proved to be tougher than expected. Resentment, anger and inimicality were often expressed towards the Poles, particularly in the immediate post-war years.<sup>39</sup> However, for the younger generation of Poles the route of adaptation, integration and perhaps even gradual assimilation was a more natural process, and education provisions helped here enormously:

After all, we needed our school. [...] It allowed us to engage with the alien culture and customs in a less painful way. We were given a chance to stand on our own two feet. We were doing this simultaneously in

35 Zofia Halas, "Paderewski" w Stowell Park w Stowell Park, in *Drogami świata do Stowell Park*, London 2000, p.33. Memories recounted to me after a meeting with Stowell Park pupils in January 2007.

36 Wanda Gorbun, "Kręte drogi do "Paderewskiego" w Stowell Park", in: *Drogami świata do Stowell Park*, London 2000, p. 71.

37 Interviews with girls (ladies) who had attended the Stowell Park Grammar School took place during an annual reunion ('Opłatek') in January 2006 at POSK, the Polish Cultural and Social Association in Hammersmith, London. A separate interview with Sister Bożena, who obtained a diploma from School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) – University of London in 1954.

38 *Education in exile*, op.cit., p.24.

39 This resentment directed at the Poles is emphasized by Peter Stachura in several works, for example *Poland in the Twentieth Century*, London 1999, pp.113–34, or *The Poles in Britain. 1940–2000*, London, 2004, pp.53–54. Trade Unions were often suspicious of workers who openly manifested their anti-Communist attitude. At the time, Polish workers could hardly conceal their views. The Transport and General Workers' Union with its own anti-Communist attitude was an exception here.

both languages.<sup>40</sup>

Whilst with the passing years the Poles gradually acknowledged the need to adapt to a new society, and as their children were being quickly assimilated albeit often to some version of Polonia, they were impelled by the need to keep and cultivate their language, culture, and history. As a consequence, the Poles' response to any implicit or explicit assimilation policy was to reactivate the Polish Educational Society in May 1953 and to launch the Saturday School Movement, which has been a vital part of the Polish community in Great Britain ever since. Along with pre-existing Polish organizations – the Polish Ex-Combatants' Organization and the Federation of Poles in Great Britain – the Saturday schools aimed to help the next generation of Polish children to learn their language, history and traditions. It enabled the second and third generation to understand and maintain their evolving identity however hybridised and to learn how, even in the diaspora, to remain proud of their Polish roots. There are at present some 100 Polish Saturday Schools in England engaged in supplementary education which is focussed on maintaining Polishness among an influx of Poles three times that of 1946-1949.<sup>41</sup>

## 5.2 Adult education in hostels and housing estates as an instrument of social integration

The reorganization of the Polish community appeared to be an essential step on the way to its rehabilitation and successful integration. A special effort was made by the Educational Organizers to make contact with British institutions willing to cooperate in this assignment. Among them were: Anglo-Polish Societies, Women's Voluntary Services, Women's Institutes and youth clubs. They all developed various forms of leisure activities, such as lectures on British life, social evenings, discussion clubs and concerts organized in the hostels.

Summer excursions to London, Oxford and Stratford-on-Avon were regular summer features for the hostels' residents. By September 1954, 270 trips (with 8,535 participants) to London and places of interest and 83 visits (with 2,120 participants) to English theatre performances and concerts (including visits to London theatres) had taken place. There were also a number popular sporting events organized within the camps and hostels. Polish football teams played regularly in local amateur leagues. The total number of matches played against local English teams exceeded 477.<sup>42</sup> A number of Poles also played in local English teams.

As the years passed, the Polish refugee population living in camps and hostels had a better sense of belonging to the local communities. They were participating more actively in the life of their communities.

When in February 1950 Doddington Hostel was routinely visited, the Poles seemed to be very organized and active:

Most volunteer teams for cultural works are provided by the active Youth Club (102 members), which has sections for Sport, Amateur Theatricals, Decorative Art, Reading and Radio. (...) Many social organizations active in the hostel (e.g. Polish Combatants Association Branch – 126 members, Polish Union of Craftsmen and Workers – 70 members, Parents' Committee – 60 members, etc.) provide a wide base of popular support for the educational activities organized on a larger scale.<sup>43</sup>

Undoubtedly, the Polish Community underwent great changes in these first few years. Poles were becoming less reluctant to take new initiatives and more responsive in relation to social and educational activities. They were setting up their own organizations and becoming more independent. They were, in fact, slowly adapting to the new reality.

Furthermore, the British administration, when preparing a summary report on the Committee's activity, noted that as the years passed the Poles' response to civic integration had become more evident and generous. In the British view, Poles were emerging as a very promising and well integrated community. By 1953, signs of social cohesion were clearly perceptible. The participation of Polish residents in the social life of Britain was cautiously reported upon in all camps and hostels:

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40 B.M., statement made during the interviews with Stowell Park Secondary School pupils conducted in January 2007 at POSK, London, during an annual reunion, 'Oplatek'.

41 Polish Saturday Schools teach Polish language, History and Geography. Their numbers fluctuate for demographic reasons. The sschools are independent units that secure the necessary funds themselves. The costs are usually met by parents; local or central government grants are rare. See Podhorodecka's history of the PMS.

42 Report of the Chairman of the Committee for the Education of Poles in Great Britain for the year ended 31 March 1952, ED128/14, PRO – N.A, Kew-Richmond.

43 Report on an inspection of educational and cultural activities at Doddington NAB Hostel, Cheshire, on 28 February and 2 March 1950, FO371/100725, PRO – N.A., Kew-Richmond.p.2.

Almost every hut in the Hostel was decorated with British and Polish flags, pictures of the Queen and members of the Royal family, flowers etc.

(...) On 2.6, roughly speaking, about 200 residents watched the Coronation on the television at the Warden's home and at the homes of two Polish residents who are in possession of TV set.

(...) On 2.6.53., in the afternoon, a party of about 20 members of the Youth Club went to Williston on the invitation of the local Coronation Committee, to perform Polish folk dances in the open air. They were met with a very warm reception by an audience of about 2,000 English people and were given a smart Coronation tin of biscuits as the price for their performance.<sup>44</sup>

Undeniably, the integration process had become more embedded. In British eyes, the spontaneity shown by the Polish community's response to the Coronation events was probably the first visible evidence of integration and remained very symbolic:

The Poles' response to the call for civic defence was immediate and generous. There was a spontaneous desire to participate in British life, not only in its pleasures – great was Polish rejoicing over the Coronation – but in its responsibilities as well. The fact that the Polish hostels contributed £276 to the Lord Major's Fund for the Flood victims of 1953 is an indication of their desire to identify themselves with Great Britain and her people's way of life.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, however, as noted previously, the Poles remained aware of their national identity and duly cultivated their own traditions, religion and language. Although throughout the Coronation year the Polish community seemed to be becoming more integrated, its patriotic nature and the awareness of their own identity had also matured. Throughout the year, Polish national events were celebrated openly and the number of Polish cultural organizations being newly set up also kept rising.

Consequently, it is unsurprising that Poles were becoming popular and likable company among their British associates. They enjoyed a good reputation among the local population.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, during interviews with the representatives of the British community in Melton Mowbray, on 6 September 2010, the Poles were remembered as very genuine and hospitable cohabitants, frequently inviting their neighbours to their dwellings, particularly during their national festive events at Christmas and Easter. They were perceived as an open and friendly people, and in the memory of their ordinary British neighbours, the image of the shy and vulnerable Pole was gradually fading away.<sup>47</sup>

The ambitious task of immediately integrating the Poles into mainstream British society – the purpose behind the Polish Resettlement Act, which had sought to integrate those living in concentrated settlements into the local population within a few years after their arrival – had been somewhat delayed. From the Committee's point of view the main impediment to the assimilation process had been problems with the location and provision of appropriate housing:

[...] The biggest obstacle to assimilation has been the unfortunate, though doubtless inevitable segregation of large numbers of Poles in the N.A.B camps, where they are not in regular contact with the ordinary people.<sup>48</sup>

In 1953, a considerable number of Poles were still housed in camps and hostels run by the National Assistance Board. Most of them were still just 'camps' of Poles stuck in the countryside at some distance from their local communities; this constituted a serious spatial obstacle to integration.

In the summer of 1953, it was decided that the provision of council houses for the Poles would be the only effective solution.<sup>49</sup> In fact, most camps were eventually closed in the 1950's and late 1960's.<sup>50</sup>

44 Report on Coronation Celebrations at Doddington Park, FO371/100725, PRO – N.A., Kew-Richmond, p.2.

45 *Education in exile*, Ministry of Education, 1956, ED128/10, PRO – N.A., Kew-Richmond, p.43.

46 This statement was confirmed in the reports from Doddington Park and Melton Mowbray (1947-54), ED128/24 and ED128/25, PRO – N.A., Kew-Richmond.

47 Melton Mowbray Times, July 1952, FO371/71587, PRO – N.A., Kew-Richmond.

48 Letter written by Mr Howard (Home Office) to Mr Harrod from 19 December 1951, ED128/148, PRO – N.A., Kew-Richmond.

49 Note on meeting held 9 June 1953, ED128/148, PRO – N.A., Kew-Richmond. p.2.

50 Northwick Park Camp (Gloucestershire) was closed in 1968, though according to local (British) residents the last Polish families only moved out in 1973. Based on interviews with local residents who lived close to the Northwick Park Estates in the 1960's and 1970's. These interviews took place in July 2008. Ashby Folville Camp (Leicestershire) was closed in 1958; Babdown (Gloucestershire) in 1959; Daglingworth (Gloucestershire) in 1961; Melton Mowbray (Leicestershire) in 1962; Kelvedon (Essex) in 1959.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has explored the experience of the Polish refugees who settled in the resettlement camps in the United Kingdom after World War II. It examined the key issues related to the resettlement of the Polish refugees, tracing the process by which a coherent policy was developed by the British parliament, the conditions that make for 'successful' integration.

It is hoped that, through its account of the many obstacles that arose during the passage of the Polish Resettlement Act and the creation of the Committee for the Education of Poles, this study has shown how challenging an experience these two events proved to be for the British government. The underlying political pressure applied to the various government agencies by the Foreign Office, together with frequent interventions in the affairs of the Polish Corps by the Communist government in Poland, could only complicate matters. There is no doubt that passing the two subsequent Acts created pillars of the migration policy shaped for the Polish political refugees.

These initiatives assisted the Polish community through the most difficult phases in their adjustment to a new life. They shaped the everyday life of the Polish diaspora for many years to come and delineated the structure of the Polish community. There is no doubt that the activities of the government agencies brought to life by the British not only helped Poles, but contributed to rebuilding the country's economy after the war.

For the British, the passing of the Polish Resettlement Act and the creation of the different agencies related to it was undoubtedly their first modern experience arising out of mass migration and an unprecedented challenge. There was no template to follow, no past precedent. Nor was there any inkling of how to deal with the vast numbers involved. There had been no comparable migration to Britain in the past millennium. The immediate impact of the Polish migration of the 1940s far exceeded that of the Irish or the Jews from the Russian Empire in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Resettling the Poles cannot be seen merely as an altruistic gesture to the Poles by the British government. The economic context must also be taken into account. It became apparent that post-war Britain needed significant manpower in order to reconstruct an economy that had been largely destroyed by war. Workers from abroad could help. The new migration policy that emerged was more relaxed than anything immediately before the war, enabling foreigners to take up various posts and settle in Britain. The Poles fitted the required purposes well.

Poles and their dependants won the right to be resettled in Britain. Families and relatives of serving members of the Polish Armed Forces were granted the same right to enter Britain and stay if they wished to do so. In this regard at least, the treatment of Polish ex-servicemen can therefore be considered as privileged compared to other migrant groups. Eventually, Poles were granted the right to become naturalised as British citizens.<sup>51</sup> From March 1948, the Home Secretary announced that applications for British citizenship would be accepted from Polish ex-servicemen.<sup>52</sup> Churchill's pledge had finally been met.<sup>53</sup>

In the end, the Poles emerged as dedicated contributors to the rebuilt British economy. In the workplace they have always been seen by Britons as hard-working and reliable employees. Those who obtained secondary or higher education found profitable and prestigious posts in the British labour market and made successful professional careers.<sup>54</sup> The Committee's aim of adapting Polish exiles to a new life was slowly being achieved.

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51 The group naturalization of Poles as British citizens is explained in Collection FO371/71587, N.A, Kew-Richmond.

52 Members of the Polish Armed Forces who had been residents in Britain or the Dominions for at least five years and either joined the British armed forces or had been employed for at least a year in useful civilian employment could apply for British citizenship.

53 During the Yalta Debate in the House of Commons on 27 February 1945, the Prime Minister, Winston Spencer Churchill, made an extraordinary statement: "In any event His Majesty's Government will never forget the debt they owe to the Polish troops and for all those who have fought under our command I earnestly hope it may be possible to offer citizenship and freedom of the British Empire should they so desire." See: *The question of British nationality for Polish soldiers, sailors and airmen*. Memorandum by the Home Secretary, dated 5 March 1945, London, FO371/51177, PRO – N.A., Kew-Richmond, p.1.

54 Agata Blaszczyk, *The Resettlement of Polish refugees after the Second World War in: Forced Migration Review, Resettlement, Issue 54*, February 2017, p. 73. Two prominent examples must suffice. Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, a Polish-British physician and immunologist is currently the 345th Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge. Sir Leszek's parents arrived in the Britain in 1947 and settled in Wales, where he was born and brought up in a small, Polish-speaking community. He was knighted in 2001. Then there is Waldemar Januszczak, the well-known British art critic and broadcaster. He also was a child of Polish refugees, and tragically lost his father in a train accident when he was one year old. The classes of '46 and '47 (in particular) demonstrates the successful implementation of the principles adopted by the Committee for the Education of Poles. These children of Polish descent were born, brought up and educated in the reality of the Committee's camps or hostels. After obtaining a basic education, there they engaged in professional careers and made their Polish names recognizable in a rapidly diversifying British society.

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