

Husbands Bosworth
Polish Resettlement
Camp (1948-58)

Husbands Bosworth Polish Resettlement Camp (1948-58):

*Polish Identity in
Post-War Britain*

By

Urszula Szulakowska

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The present study is based in many instances on my own and others' childhood memories of the Polish camp at Husbands Bosworth. These recollections are generic and mostly accord with those of former adult residents. A great deal of information has been gained through many years of discussions with my family members, as well as with others who once lived at the camp, or with those who had a broader involvement with the post-1945 Polish settlement in Britain. Although there are problems with relying on eye-witness evidence, nonetheless, if such personal evidence is not used when the documentary archive fails, then the history of the Polish camp may disappear. For, the documentary archive is very limited, even though a number of photographs of persons and events have survived. Oral history, consequently, has to be taken into account. However, this causes problems with the scholarly citation of some information. Many decades have passed since the camp closed in 1958 and it is not always possible to recall exactly when the data concerning certain issues and incidents was obtained.

So, it is with gratitude that I would like to acknowledge, first, my own family in passing on the history of their post-war experiences in the United Kingdom and the former British colonies, as well as details of their former lives in Poland. Primarily, I would like to thank Matylda and Antoni Szulakowski, Petronela Brodalka, Stanisław Brodalka, Józef Brodalka, Michał and Justyna Haniecki, Marysia, Petrysia, Zygmund and Czesław Brodalka, Paul and Debbie Brodalka, Ola (Aleksandra) and Marian Kobiątko, Jan Szulakowski and Karen Szulakowska. Florian Brodalka has been especially helpful in retrieving photographs, as well as information concerning the fate of family members in Poland during the massacres perpetrated by extremist Ukrainian nationalists. He has also transcribed the war-time diaries of his brother, Józef Brodalka, which has helped to ensure their future conservation. In addition, Irena Cooney has facilitated the use of materials belonging to the Canadian branch of the family. Further, it has been a privilege to have had contact in Poland with Waclaw and Zofia Kociuba, as well as with the family of Mieczysław Ławrynowicz. I am also grateful to Halina Niesłuchowska who supplied information concerning the Handziewicz family. All of my relatives provided me with archival documentation. The older family members shared their memories of their deportation to the USSR and of their journey to Britain. In Poland, my

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Where it has been possible to locate documentary and photographic evidence, then I have taken recourse to such resources. In particular, I have relied on the archives of the Szulakowski and Brodalka families which are the most complete of any family archives that I have had occasion to view in the particular context of the Polish camps in Britain. In this regard, I am particularly grateful to Halina Szulakowska who retrieved a great deal of material over many years from family members living in the UK, as well as in Canada and Poland. She has generously shared her findings with me, including photographs and family histories, as well as her Timeline which locates the story of the family within a wider historical context. She has contributed her own historical account of Antoni Szulakowski to the BBC's *WW2 People's War. An archive of World War Two memories written by the public ...*. Halina also produced the first published record of the Husbands Bosworth camp for the local community paper at Welford. I thank her for her pioneering research.

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It was a rare privilege to have been personally involved in the extraordinary history of the Polish resettlement camps in Britain of the 1950s. I thank the other residents for sharing that history with me and for leaving me with such vivid memories of that unique time when we had our own corner of Poland. The culture of the Husbands Bosworth Polish camp was in so many ways a continuation of pre-war Poland. However, the residents also had to renegotiate their own concepts of “Polishness” in response to the specific conditions of life in Britain. They created, as a result, a distinctive cultural phenomenon unique to this country and their achievement deserves to be recorded.

Rugby (2020)

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INTRODUCTION

The present study is an account of daily life at a Polish resettlement camp in Northamptonshire during the early 1950s. The camp stood in the middle of a decommissioned aerodrome built on the estate of the Paget family at Sulby Hall, between Welford and Naseby. The original site had been named “Husbands Bosworth” by the military authorities and the same name was used for the Polish camp.¹ In fact, the village of Husbands Bosworth is some two or three miles distant. The Polish Resettlement Act of 1947 had determined the fate of Poles stranded in Britain after the war. As a result in 1948 the Sulby aerodrome, like many other wartime military sites, was converted into a Polish camp housing some three hundred residents.

This history is a little-known aspect of the post-war reconstruction of Britain, as of the wider history of the Polish diaspora. However, the present study is not intended to be a piece of nostalgia recalling how the lost culture of the Second Polish Republic (1918-39) was temporarily revived within Britain of the late 1940s. On the contrary, what emerged out of the hundreds of rural Polish camps, urban Polish clubs, libraries, museums, churches and schools was a unique culture of its own kind. Although this new type of Polish society was closely related to its origins in pre-war Poland and had distant contacts with contemporary communist Poland, nevertheless, it produced a unique mind-set with its own form of Polish language, its own political ideologies, social pecking-orders, cultural outputs and nationalistic rhetoric. This Polish society was a product indigenous to the British Isles, created by the Polish diaspora in a dynamic, ambivalent and wary relationship with the British community. The discussion in the present context has been focused on one fundamental issue, namely, that of national identity, that is, of “Polishness” in conflict with “Englishness,” or “Britishness.” The specific aim has been to record the struggle to retain “Polishness” (Pol. “Polskość”) in post-war Britain. Further, the question has to be asked as to what sort of “Polishness” was at stake and how did this differ from “Polishness” prior to 1939 and since 2004?

Immediately after the war, as they reviewed their own situation stranded in strange lands with no hope of returning home, despite their lamentable

¹ Alison Lowe, “Sulby Hall” in Alison Lowe, Liz Dowell and Elizabeth Taylor, *The History of Sulby Gardens* (2016), pp. 10-11

state, the Poles never considered themselves to be “refugees,” only “displaced persons” (“DP’s”). In fact, the Polish camps were officially known as “resettlement camps,” never as “refugee” camps. This was because the Poles who settled in the UK after 1945 had not fled Poland in order to seek asylum in the UK. The great majority had been arrested and deported from 1940 onwards, either by the Soviet secret police to labour camps in Stalinist Russia, or by the Nazis as forced labour to Germany. By the end of the war in 1945 there were some 112, 000 Polish soldiers enlisted in the British Armed Forces. The greater number of these had been deported to the Soviet Union with their families. Most of them came to Britain at the war’s end and the numbers of Poles in the UK increased once the soldiers’ families had also been transferred to the UK from the British colonies where they had spent the war. The young men and women married and a new generation was born. Almost no Poles were able to return to Poland in the 1940s and 1950s and quite soon as many as half of them migrated from Britain to the British colonies. In the mid-1950s this left around 200, 000 Poles residing in the British Isles, the total population increasing with the newest generation. Few Poles wanted to remain permanently in the UK and until the early 1960s most of them never abandoned hope of returning to a free Poland, preferably within its original pre-1939 borders. Only a tiny number ever went home. The communist-controlled country of the late 1940s was not the same land from which the dispossessed Poles had been driven. The borders had shifted two hundred miles westwards and most of the Poles in the UK came from Eastern Poland which had been incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1939. There was no homeland to which they could return.

The camp at Husbands Bosworth was run by the Polish Resettlement Corps (PRC) (1946-49) and the National Assistance Board (NAB) (1946-66) and soon entirely by the NAB. The Poles, male and female alike, were mostly fully-employed in local industry and agriculture as manual labourers. Only the very oldest received a minimum NAB payment of about nine shillings a week. The families lived in single-skin, corrugated-iron Nissen huts, or in concrete-block barracks, heated by a cast iron stove and a paraffin heater. There was no running-water. Toilets and bath-houses were communal facilities. Nevertheless, the Poles paid rent for these huts and they also had to purchase their own electricity, fuel and every-day necessities. There were no hand-outs from the state, nor from local councils and no choice as to the type of employment. Immediately after the end of the war jobs were allocated by the PRC and the Poles and other DP nationals were obliged by law to accept them. Nor were they free to leave their assigned place of work. The duration of life in the camps was finite,

however, and by the mid-fifties people were moving into towns and cities, mostly to Leicester, Market Harborough and Rugby and in 1958 the Husbands Bosworth camp was closed.

Life in the camp was probably no worse for the Poles than it was for the poorest sections of British society in the bombed-out cities, or the slums. In fact, there was a lot of enjoyment in the camp despite the grim conditions and the resilient Poles quickly rebuilt their lives. They had a good, if distant, relationship with the local British communities. The Poles organised Polish primary and nursery schools in the Husbands Bosworth camp, after which the children joined local state schools, or in some cases went on to private, Polish secondary schools. The necessities of life were acquired and no-one starved, since the Poles earned enough to purchase both staple and some luxury goods. A van with provisions arrived every week from Welford, while Polish food was supplied from Northampton. Despite the individual despair of a life lived in involuntary exile, the camp was a sociable place with parties, dinners, dances, weddings, christenings, funerals, theatrical events, concerts, religious festivals, political meetings and lectures, as well as various interest groups. The air-force gymnasium had been converted into a Catholic church and there was a resident priest, as well as different prayer-groups. In addition, a community-hall was organised with a large library and newspapers, film shows, a drama group, a choir, sewing-circle, cookery classes, English-language classes, a volleyball court, a Polish Saturday school for the children, as well as the Polish equivalents of cubs, brownies, scouts and guides. Initially, there was even a Polish primary school and, briefly, a hospital. The nursery school survived till the camp closed. The adults played cards, grew tobacco, gardened, made furniture, sewed, knitted, kept poultry and rabbits. They were especially active within the different Polish ex-servicemen's associations, especially the SPK (Pol. "Stowarzyszenie Polskich Kombatantów"), the association of Polish ex-combatants, which included both men and women. In support of the exiled Polish Government in London, it was the SPK that led the struggle against communism in Poland. Furthermore, the SPK was responsible for the organisation of Polish cultural centres, Saturday schools and churches around the country.

In the present context, the issues arising from the daily experience of the Poles are analysed critically. There is no intention to present the history of the Husbands Bosworth camp either as an idyllic "Little Poland," or, conversely, as a gloomy site of tragedy, grief and loss, although all of these aspects were present. The relationship of the exasperated Poles to the unsuspecting local English communities, as well as to the uncomprehending British state authorities, were critical factors in the successful establishment

of the community at Sulby and in the development of their self-image as patriotic Poles.

Oral History

In this account, the author has relied primarily on the witness testimony of those who had lived in the Husbands Bosworth camp, namely, adults of all generations, as well as children, while acknowledging that such witness testimony is problematic due to its subjectivity. Nevertheless, this seems to be necessary since there are very few histories, almost none, in the English language that record the history of the Polish camps in Britain. For that matter, there are not many accounts in Polish either. The few English accounts that have appeared so far have originated either as community projects, or on the initiative of a few private individuals. All of those published have relied on oral history. In fact, unless the historian takes recourse to eye-witness testimony in a study of such small, little-recorded communities, then there is a scarcity of any other evidence, whether in public, or in private archives.

In particular, I have had to present my own witness testimony in relation to this history as someone who lived as a child in the Husbands Bosworth camp from 1950 to 1957. There has been little choice in the matter since my own family archives are rich in visual imagery and documentation. In addition, considerable work has been carried out by Halina Szulakowska in retrieving oral family history and archival materials. To take recourse to oral witness, specifically to personal recollection, is an unusual strategy for an empiricist historian such as myself and I have done so reluctantly and with considerable caution. However, the positive results of including my own evidence have outweighed the problems of subjective interpretation and failed memory. I have sought to integrate my own experiences within those of others in the camp in order to present a broader viewpoint. One advantage of my own presence within the narrative is that I am able to give a child's perspective on this history. This aspect is particularly important in the context of a conflicted historical situation in which Polish adults were struggling to retain Polish national identity for their children, while the children themselves were rapidly being assimilated into British culture. Facing in two different directions, the youngest members of the Polish diaspora confronted an irresolvable dilemma in which they were being torn away from their parents' culture, while at the same time being forced to internalise something called "Polishness" (Pol. "Polskość"). This could result in difficult relationships within a family when the children began to speak English more fluently than they did Polish, leading to increasingly

limited communications with their parents who mostly refused to speak the alien tongue at home. The subtle and contradictory aspects of acquiring national identity, specifically Polish versus British (English), are advantageously viewed from the view-point of an eye-witness. Such evidence facilitates a clearer comprehension of what was at stake in this painful process. A personal involvement provides a different view from the limited one available to the English-speaking historian. In any case, since the documentary evidence is so incomplete, I have had no choice but to draw on my own memories and on our family archives.

The families of former residents usually hold a few old letters, war-time service records, documents of alien registration, marriage and birth certificates, as well as some black and white, or sepia, photographs, too often ill-lit and out-of-focus, poorly composed and taken on cheap camera stock, as well as battered with time. The private photographic archives consist by far mostly of portraits that reveal only small details concerning the housing and life-style of the camps. There is almost no record of how the interiors of the barracks looked, nor of the appearance of the gardens, nor the lay-out of the different sites. For the most part, the photographs document public events such as theatrical performances and, above all, religious ceremonies. The private letters from this time deal with immediate family concerns, rather than providing any comprehensive record of daily life in the community. The numerous published accounts and autobiographies written by witnesses who were adults in the 1940s are largely in the Polish language and they deal primarily with the war, rather than with the post-war civilian resettlement. The National Archives at Kew hold a certain amount of official documentation recording the administration of the Polish camps, but these papers do not cover the entire area of study and the camps are dealt-with in terms of general policy, rather than recording specific instances. The Polish Resettlement Corps archives document the different activities of the PRC through into the early 1960s. The PRC subsequently gave the responsibility for running the Polish camps to the National Assistance Board. The PRC records are limited in their use as historical data since they are incomplete and there is no special file dedicated to the Husbands Bosworth camp at Sulby. Only a very few files relate to specific camps, most especially Tweedsmuir. Of greater value in the PRC archives are the records of the resettlement camps for aliens established in Italy and France and the subsequent evacuation of their inhabitants to the UK. These sources also relate to the Polish hospitals established in Italy at Barletta and Trani to care for servicemen and their families. They provide accounts of those employed and the terms of their employment, as well as throwing some light on subsequent decisions to

evacuate to the UK.²² There is also some information concerning Polish migration to Canada. Various files relate to the organisation of the camps in the UK, dealing with health issues, clothing, welfare subsidies, education, the care of orphans and unaccompanied children and the final closures of the camps.

In order to amplify the documentary resources, it is necessary to refer to oral testimony. The main problem here is that of over-subjectivity in the construction of a narrative in addition to the failings of memory. Methodological problems in taking recourse to oral history as a research tool have been closely debated in the past few decades. The current consensus is to value oral testimony for what it can reveal concerning otherwise invisible and unavailable history that is absent from the archives.³³ Oral history is also most often associated with those removed from the archive due to political and economic deprivation. These are often minority groups located on the edges of mainstream society, such as, in the present instance, the displaced Poles in Britain and their children. As Graham Smith has written concerning oral history projects:

²² Records of the Polish Resettlement Corps in Britain, France and Italy may be accessioned at the National Archives, Kew, online <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/results/r?q=polish+resettlement+camps> (retrieved 09. 03. 2019) See File Reference WO 315/46 Polish civilian settlement camps in Italy, postal inspection reports, evacuations of civilians from Russia and Middle East. 1942-1948. (Former reference in original department 42A.) See also, File Ref. WO 315/46/1. Polish Civilian Settlement Camps Barletta and Trani, Italy. 1942-1948. For the migration of Poles from Italy to Canada, see File Ref. WO 315/22/2 22/2. Demobilisation of emigrants to Canada from Naples. 1946 Oct 16-1946 Nov 16. There are also records covering the care of Polish orphans, as well as the movement of Polish forces from France to the UK and the provision of accommodation and work-training.

³³ See, for example, the arguments in Joan Tumblety (ed.), *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject* (Routledge Guides to Using Historical Sources), London: Routledge (2013), passim. See also Paul Thompson, "Problems of Method in Oral History," *Oral History*, Vol. 1, No. 4, issue "The Interview in Social History: Part 1" (1972), pp. 1-47. And online <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40178408> (retrieved 23. 03. 2018) See also Amelia R. Fry, "Suffragist Alice Paul's Memoirs: Pros and Cons of Oral History," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, "Women's Oral History" (Summer, 1977), pp. 82-86 (University of Nebraska Press). And see also, Susie Dalton, "What are oral histories and why are they important?" 9th August, (2017) online <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2017/08/09/what-are-oral-histories-and-why-are-they-important/> (retrieved 13. 02. 2018)

Oral history continues to be an important means by which non-academics can actively participate in “making history”.⁴

In the 1970s and 1980s many oral historians were combining “history from below” with the aim of providing a voice for those who would otherwise be “hidden from history.”⁵ For, while most history tends to be written from the point of view of the dominating political factions, an early aim of oral historians from the 1970s was to collect memories from the less privileged and silenced sections of society in order to introduce new perspectives to history. In Britain the *History Workshop* movement was important in developing an oral history that recorded the voices of the less powerful majority. (Historians involved in this type of historical analysis included Asa Briggs, Elizabeth Roberts, Raphael Samuel and John Saville.) However, until the 1980s academic historians had reservations concerning the validity of eye-witness testimony and oral historians were obliged to combine this with archival resources to apply as a check on memory and bias. Not that written materials are by their nature at all objective, since political bias enters all fields of scholarly endeavour. In addition, oral historians have adopted other methods of testing the reliability of witness, such as sociological tools of data analysis, psychological approaches and the findings of psycho-analysis. Further, by comparing the memories of different subjects it is possible to provide a check on over-biased testimony. In this respect, community projects have been especially useful as a way of establishing the reliability of an oral record.

Victims of Wartime Trauma

Another issue raised in the present study is the situation of adults who had experienced severe psychological trauma during the war and of the children born to such parents, enquiring in what manner such experiences affected both of these generations. Certainly, it has been established in psychological studies that survivors of trauma in wartime may experience later symptoms such as emotional withdrawal, inability to express emotions,

⁴ Graham Smith (Institute of Historical Research, London University), “The making of oral history: Sections 1–2” online <https://historyproject.org.uk/blogs/making-oral-history-article-graham-smith>). See also the same article in the “Making History Project” at the Institute of Historical Research, London University online https://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/oral_history.html (retrieved 11. 02. 2019)

⁵ Graham Smith, “The making of oral history: Sections 1–2,” op. cit.

over-protection and over-control of their children.⁶ A recent autobiographical account by a British author of Jewish origins, Rita Goldberg, has examined the effects of the Holocaust, not only on her own mother and father, but also on herself and her sister. Goldberg's description of the effects on herself is paralleled by the experience of some second-generation Polish children in Britain.⁷ She experienced periods of depression and was pressurised into feeling a responsibility for her mother and a need to be protective of her. Certainly, it is possible to recognise similarities in experience among second-generation Polish children whose parents' histories dominated their own throughout their lives. As children they were inevitably emotionally affected by the terrible stories told to them by their parents and grand-parents concerning the deportations from 1940 to Russia and Germany, as well as the atrocities committed against Polish citizens by Soviet troops, Nazi armies and the SS, let alone by Ukrainian nationalist partisans. The stories were impossible to absorb at such a young age. One unfortunate result was the development in not a few children of a sense of guilt for the misadventures of their families.

In my own instance I was left with a nagging feeling that, somehow, I had to make this up to my family. Like other Polish children, I felt to some degree that I myself had been involved in their anguished experience - that I too had been in Siberia and had been forced to endure the long wanderings through Iran, Palestine, India and Southern Rhodesia. Something beneath the hectic social life of the Polish camp and our very public lives was making me very uneasy. There was a sense of insecurity in the camp which must have been provoked by the distressed psychological condition of many adults. The older generation had been removed at night and sent to Soviet prison camps in goods-wagons, or at gun-point into slave labour in German and Austrian factories and farms, then compelled to endure the uncertainty of exile and the permanent loss of home. Undoubtedly, there was much

⁶ See, for example, the conclusions drawn in the study by Martina Krešić Ćorić, Miro Klarić, Božo Petrov and Nina Mihić, "Psychological and behavioural problems in children of war veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," *The European Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 30, No. 3, Zaragoza, July/ September (2016). The study examined the effects on children from veterans of the war in Mostar. And especially see. "The trauma of second-generation Holocaust survivors," interview with Rita Goldberg in the *Guardian* newspaper amended 17th March (2014) online <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/mar/15/trauma-second-generation-holocaust-survivors> (retrieved 11. 02. 2019)

⁷ Rita Goldberg, *Motherland: growing up with the Holocaust*, London: Halban (2014). See also, Aaron Hass, *In the shadow of the Holocaust: the second generation*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1990).