

History of Polish immigration to Australia

Polish contact with Australia dates as early as 1696 when a number of Polish crew members were on board the Dutch naval expedition which explored the coastline of Western Australia. Polish settlement in Australia dates to the early 19th century when a Polish convict by the name of Joseph Potaski (originally Potowski) arrived in the colony of Port Phillip. The party moved on to Hobart and the same Polish convict went on to become one of Tasmania's earliest and most successful wheat farmers. Over the next forty years, about a dozen persons of Polish origin settled in Australia, mainly Polish nobility and army officers. Of the most eminent was Sir Paul Edmund Strzelecki who arrived in Sydney in 1839. Explorer, cartographer and scientist, he, among other contributors, explored the Snowy mountains in 1840, published the first map of Gippsland, named Australia's highest peak Mount Kosciuszko after the great Polish freedom fighter, Tadeusz Kosciuszko, who organised an armed insurrection against the Russians in 1795. There are about 20 geographical features in Australia bearing his name including the Strzelecki Ranges.

A significant settlement was established north of Adelaide, in the 1850s known as Polish Hill River. By the 1880s, there was an established Polish colony made up of 400 people, who maintained Polish language, customs and traditions. In 1870, a Polish priest, Fr Rogalski made a significant contribution to the settlement. A Polish church was established and Polish was taught at the local school. Following his death in 1906, the community gradually integrated into the wider community, losing its distinct Polish traits.

Post Second World War Immigration:

In 1947 Arthur Calwell met with officials from the International Refugee Organisation in London. This meeting was to change the composition of Australian society forever. From 1947-54 Australia received 170, 000 displaced persons of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, 60, 000 of those were Polish. Australia needed a strong, young labour force, one that did not differ too much from the local population.

The exhibition:

This is the story of the Polish immigrants who arrived to Australia from 1947 onwards - it is about their escape from war-torn Europe, their journey, and their arrival to a strange and distant land. This story will depict where these

people came from, how they found themselves here and how they built a new life for themselves, their children and grandchildren.

This is a commemoration to the endurance of the human spirit -the journey was full of trauma, danger, great grief and loss of homeland, family, friends and belongings. The people who arrived here had suffered the consequences of the mass destruction of their homeland. Some had survived concentration camps, many were deported to labour camps in Germany and to Siberia to work in harsh and primitive conditions often confronted by hunger, death of loved ones, death of strangers and witness to human suffering. Others came as ex-service men, many still in uniform who had fought with the allies in various campaigns - Polish airmen who had fought in the battle of Britain, soldiers who fought in Tobruk, took part in the Normandy landings, the battle for Monte Cassino and so on. Others came as children and adolescents, many of whom had been orphaned during the war. These children found themselves in refugee camps in British East Africa, India, Palestine and Iran. The children were part of a significant group who had been released as Polish exiles from Siberia and had travelled through Arkhangelsk, Vorkuta, Kazakhstan, in goods trains, sick, hungry and in rags.

The paths to Australia are as diverse as the stories of people - arriving from Africa, India, Germany, Netherlands, Great Britain, Lebanon, Libia, China. They arrived in Australia with expectations of a new life, hopes for a prosperous future; many wanted to get as far away from death and the destruction they had experienced. This was often mixed with a heavy heart, 'teksnota' for their homeland, family members, their culture, traditions and memories left behind. They arrived to quite primitive conditions, in transit centres such as Bonegilla where husbands were separated from wives and children. Men worked on large projects such as building roads, the hydro electricity scheme in Tasmania and the Snowy, cane cutting in Queensland, coalminers, fruitpickers and furnace labourers in Victoria. Women worked as domestics and nurses. Many found the work hard and felt isolated. Once free of their contractual obligations they built their first home, celebrated marriages, christenings, founded cultural and religious organisations. The community developed organisational structures which maintained language, culture and religious traditions. The community welcomed and assist subsequent waves of immigrants, small numbers in the sixties and seventies and the large wave of 1980s 'Solidarity' wave. The political unrest, the implementation of martial law in 1981 and a worsening economic situation resulted in large numbers of Poles leaving Poland and seeking political asylum in western countries, including Australia. During the period 1980-91, approximately 25,000 Polish people arrived in Australia. This wave comprised

of young families, mostly people from urban settings, many with professional qualifications.

This Exhibition will trace the story of three prototypes: the soldier, the displaced person, the child. As it traces their lives it will reflect on the community now; on where it has come to and how it looks towards the future to the new millennium. It is hoped that through this exhibition the community will have an opportunity to grieve for what was lost, give thanks, memorialise and celebration the survival and achievements during the past 50 years of Polish immigration and settlement. This may help the community gradually and progressively move from the sense of loss to a phase of renewal and recovery in which the experiences are integrated and seen as a symbol in the past not only of hurt and loss but also of community strength (Rachael & Wilson, 1993).