

# Life After Pahiatua

On 1 November 1944 a total of 733 Polish children and their 105 guardians landed in Wellington Harbour. Together they had shared the fate of 1.7 million Poles who had been ethnically cleansed from their homes in eastern Poland under Stalin's orders at the start of World War II and deported to forced-labour camps throughout the Soviet Union. Of those 1.7 million, 1 million died and 200,000 are still unaccounted for in Stalin's genocide.

This group of children, mostly orphaned or having lost family members, were the lucky ones and found eventual refuge in the Polish Children's Camp in Pahiatua and a permanent home in New Zealand.

**These are their stories of life after the camp where they successfully integrated and contributed to New Zealand society, while retaining their Polish culture.**

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# JÓZEFA BERRY (nee Węgrzyn)

(b. 1927 Poland)

Józefa's family of six orphan children was 'lucky to be selected to travel to New Zealand, as we were initially on the list for Mexico'. Their mother and father had died of typhoid fever in Uzbekistan in 1942 within a few days of each other. Józefa was the second-eldest child and placed in the senior class for one year at the Polish Children's Camp in Pahiatua. Her class was a 'lively and close-knit group'.

Józefa has happy memories from the camp life, performing in little plays and nativity scenes and leading a Girl Guides group. 'Once we had a Girl Guides meeting on a beautiful fine day by the river but when cows came to visit we all ran away scared and never went back. Though I was reluctant to go to Sacred Heart College in Christchurch, I spent a year there with three other Polish girls, including Władysława Nawalaniec (later Sister Casimir). I left there to start my nursing training'.

Józefa considers selecting nursing as her career the right decision. It gave her many opportunities to make a lot of friends and work in various hospitals around the country. She did her general training at Masterton Public Hospital so she could be near the Pahiatua camp where her younger brother and sister were cared for until 1949. There were many long, sometimes lonely months of study in English, which was time consuming and difficult.

The social dances and nurses' balls were the highlights of Józefa's training. They gave her some 'light-hearted fun and excitement'. It was at one of these balls that she met and danced with Peter, her future husband. His letters to her were long and always something she looked forward to during her study. Józefa did maternity training at Hastings Memorial Hospital and graduated with an award. Living in the Nurses' Home was enjoyable



with the friendliness of the other girls and the community spirit. Some of the hospitable families she befriended invited her to stay during her days off. But she still missed her Polish community.

Józefa married Peter in 1952 and during their marriage they moved several times. She worked at Wellington and Christchurch public hospitals, Princess Margaret, St George's Surgical Hospital, St Nicholas' Geriatric Hospital, and nursed many private cases for the Nursing Bureau in Christchurch and Lower Hutt. She also worked in Pahiatua Hospital for three months in 1950. Józefa and Peter moved to Lower Hutt in 1975 where she was glad to be 'closer to my family and the Polish community'. She worked for 12 years as a staff nurse for the fracture clinic in Lower Hutt Hospital.

Józefa tried four months of psychiatric training at Sunnyside Hospital, Christchurch, but 'this was not my cup of tea. I remember many long night shifts, and coming home to be mum to my family of five children during the day meant plenty of tiring times'. She reluctantly retired at 60, which was the compulsory retirement age in those days. Józefa nursed in a private geriatric hospital in Taita for a few months, then 'hung up my nursing uniform for gardening and my grandmother role.'

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# RYSZARD JANUSZ BIAŁOSTOCKI

(b. 1935 Kołędziany, Poland, now Ukraine)

Following the first few years spent at the Pahiatua camp, young Ryszard moved to Wellington and in 1948 he went to a boarding College (St Patrick's) in Silverstream, learning rugby and playing in the First XV team, becoming a prefect and receiving a gold medal for diligence in his final year. He left with very special memories and lifelong friendships.

He went on to attend Victoria University in 1953 for his intermediate Engineering year. Following a successful application, Ryszard was awarded a Ministry of Works bursary for the remainder of his degree. He moved to Canterbury University and graduated with a Bachelor of Engineering degree as a Civil Engineer.

Ryszard started his career in land development work for the Ministry of Works in Wellington. And then projects such as building dams at the hydro-electric schemes on the Waikato River. This then led onto designing bridges for the Wellington Urban Motorway, supervising bridge and tunnel construction and later being appointed in charge of the Motorway Design Office. One of the most significant projects of the time was the massive Thorndon over-bridge - crossing over the top of the railway yards, it was then the longest six lane bridge in New Zealand! In 1978 Ryszard won a New Zealand Road Federation study Award and spent three months touring the World studying bridges. It also enabled him to return to Poland for the first time in 38 years.

Due to the world oil crisis in the late 70's, he joined a special unit to advise the Government on alternative fuel options. New Zealand was low on oil but had a good supply of natural gas. The Ministry of Energy appointed Ryszard to San



Francisco for 2 years to oversee the scope and design of the world's first synthetic fuels plant to be built in New Zealand - a plant that could turn natural gas into petrol. The Białostocki family transferred to San Francisco and while in the USA, amongst many wonderful experiences, Ryszard gave a lecture at Stanford University on how fuel issues had been solved in New Zealand. The plant built in Motonui Taranaki was opened by HRH Duke of Edinburgh in February 1986. Coming back to New Zealand Ryszard was appointed Assistant District Commissioner of Works in Wellington and then 2 years later Assistant Chief Civil Engineer for NZ.

After 30 years of working in the public sector, Ryszard took the opportunity to move into the private sector. Initially joining Telecom then moving to Norseman Pacific Ltd - a Commercial Property firm. During his time as Managing Director they constructed and managed the build of the \$180M, 21 story Parkroyal (now Intercontinental) hotel/office tower in Wellington CBD, Midland on the Park project and many others. Following the completion of these projects, in 2004 Ryszard joined the Department of Building and Housing and advised all Local Authorities in New Zealand on the new Earthquake Prone Buildings law.

After 49 years of his Engineering career Ryszard retired in 2007 and in 2012, together with his wife Zofia, they moved to Tauranga to be closer to family. Life is still busy and full spending time with their 3 children, 8 grandchildren and one great grand-daughter.



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# IRENA COATES (nee OGONOWSKA)

(b. 1932, Baranowicze, now Belarus)

Following the period at the Pahiatua Camp, Irena was dispatched to a girls' boarding school in Timaru and became one of 100 boarders. She loved learning English and French, and found French much easier as she already had a foundation of the language while in Iran. After four years at boarding school Irena passed School Certificate and it was time for another transition. She was accepted for Christchurch Teachers' College to train as a primary teacher.

Being a student was an interesting experience for Irena as she became one of 300 students and met many friendly young people. Life was full of adventure. This was an exciting experience and the beginning of a lifelong interest in how people learn.

After graduating Irena taught in many schools. Her first permanent posting was to a Māori school in Gisborne where her work was fascinating. In that school, mothers came to school with their children every day and stayed in the classroom, taking part in all learning activities. It was only later that she discovered this was the road to literacy for many adults.



Early in her teaching career, Irena met and married a New Zealand journalist, Ken Coates. They had four children, who have all become professional people – in law, management and the arts.

In 1979, Ken was posted to London to represent the four main newspapers in New Zealand and so Irena accompanied him there and taught in special education in central London. Living there enabled Irena to visit her homeland for the first time since arriving in New Zealand.

While working in England Irena had the opportunity to study at London University. Following her interest in how people learn, she gained a Diploma in Teaching based on her work in teaching children with learning disabilities, particularly in language acquisition. Later, she became interested in teaching English as a second language and this led her to teach English in China for two years. Irena also taught English at the University of Canterbury English Language School. She found language learning a fascinating experience that also enables dealing with students from many different countries. She sees her background to be helpful in understanding the needs of foreign students, and therefore in facilitating their English language learning with perception and understanding based on her own experience as a learner and teacher.



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# KRYSTYNA DOWNEY

(nee KOŁODYŃSKA)

(b. 1931 Krzemieniec, Poland, now Ukraine)

**Krystyna stayed at the camp in Pahiatua just over two months. As a 13-year-old, in January 1945 she went to Auckland and for the next four years she was a boarder at the Convent of the Sacred Heart (now Baradene).**

Krystyna learnt English (and French), passed her School Certificate, then University Entrance. She left school when she was 17, enrolled at Auckland University and three years later graduated with a BA in languages majoring in French. While at the University Krystyna met Pat Downey whom she married many years later.

On graduation, Krystyna joined the Public Service and in 1956 came to Wellington for one year. However she so loved the city she remained and is still living in Wellington. She subsequently applied and was appointed to the staff of the National Commission for UNESCO. In 1961 she did her big Overseas Experience and travelled throughout



Europe visiting places she had always wanted to visit. Then for 6 months she worked at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. On returning to New Zealand, Krystyna held the position of the Secretary of the National Commission for UNESCO for 12 years and worked closely with the Department of Foreign Affairs.

She confirms that whatever she has achieved in life, she owes to her parents. They nurtured any abilities and interests she had and supported her in every way. Krystyna owes it to her mother that she survived Siberia and Persia and that she came to New Zealand. She taught Krystyna at home when there was no school to go to and ensured that she continued with education when they came to New Zealand.

“And so eventually we all became Polish-Kiwis, grateful to the New Zealand government of the day for allowing us to come here and to all New Zealanders who made us welcome.” – she says.



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## WANDA ELLIS (nee PELC)

(b. 1928, Eastern Poland, now Ukraine – d. 2017, Auckland)

**Wanda Ellis has been involved in the propagation and promotion of the Polish language, education and culture and in helping Polish immigrants to settle in New Zealand for more than 60 years.**

From the Polish Children's Camp in Pahiatua she moved to Auckland in 1945 to continue her education at Baradene College. She attended the Auckland Business College before marrying and adopting four children. For many years she worked in the office of St Peter's College - as a secretary, nurse, mother to the boys and helper to the teaching staff - before finally retiring in 1988. In 1996, Wanda Ellis was the first recipient of the Petrus Award from St Peter's in recognition of her many years of dedicated service.

Wanda was a devoted Polish patriot and a Catholic. In the late 1950s Wanda was a founding member of the Auckland Polish Association and its first President, and played a pivotal role in fundraising for and securing land in Sandringham upon which to build the Polish Community House. She taught



Polish language and dance to local school groups for many years, organised numerous functions and reunions and successfully petitioned for the Catholic Church in Poland to send priests to New Zealand to serve the Polish community. She helped immigrants with translation of documents, finding work and settling into homes and schools, often providing interim homestay for families. She was for 24 years a Court and Document translator and interpreter for the Justice Department.

The deprivation suffered in her early life meant that she could not have children of her own. So she and her first husband Frank Power adopted four children. Frank would later die in the aftermath of a motor accident. Two of her adopted children would pre-decease Wanda, as would her second husband Tom Ellis.

In 2004, for her extraordinary involvement in activities promoting Poland, the Polish President awarded Wanda Ellis with the Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland. She was also the recipient of the Queen's Service Medal in 2015.

In 2017 Wanda Ellis published her memoirs "My Colourful Life".



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# JAN JARKA

(b. 1930, Czarnowo, Poland – d. 2008, Auckland)

Jan Jarka received his education at St Kevin's College in Oamaru, where he spent two years after leaving the Polish Children's Pahiatua Camp, and then in Auckland, where Catholic Social Services took the children's future wellbeing into their hearts by ensuring that no child entered the workforce without adequate and proper qualifications. He became an accountant and finished his working life with the then Commercial Union Fire and General Insurance Company. He retired in 1989.

During his accounting career he met a lot of nice people whose friendships he treasured for years. One of them was the solicitor David Lange. When he was the Prime Minister of New Zealand, they held a private discussion on the need for a closer approach to the needs of Polish immigrants by appointing Polish-speaking people as Justices of the Peace. Jan Jarka was sworn as a Justice of the Peace in 1990. He enjoyed the busy work in the community at large.

Since 1975 Jan had been a Minister of the Eucharist. He also assisted with the building of the new St Anne's church complex, which used the foundation stone blessed by the Polish Pope John Paul II during his visit to Auckland in 1986. In his church work he served on the Parish Pastoral Council, parent/teacher and finance committees, and parish finance committees.

He had been involved in the affairs of the Polish community since 1949. Auckland's Polish Association was registered in 1960 and it purchased an old house to serve as clubrooms. Later, the new Dom Polski (Polish House) was erected to cater for an increase in Polish migrants. This project was financed by using voluntary labour and each member contributing \$500 (\$100 each year for five years) as a repayable loan.

Jan Jarka served as president and vice-president a number of times and on the committee for almost



30 years. He was a president during the Pope's visit to Auckland in 1986, and they welcomed John Paul II in the traditional Polish way. Jan advised the Auckland archdiocese on Polish traditions, such as greeting the guest with bread and salt. During the Papal Mass they presented the gifts of a Krakow-style hat with peacock feathers and an old 1880 Polish prayer book of the early Polish settlers in Taranaki. Meeting His Holiness was a thrill for Jan as he had always hoped to meet the Pope.

Jan's interpreting/translating career began as a result of an emergency court session when two Polish citizens were caught travelling in New Zealand on illegal passports in the late 1970s. He then became an accredited interpreter for many institutions and government departments, and became a founding member of the Auckland Ethnic Council in 1985, which looks after about 40 different ethnic groups in Auckland.

In 1993 Jan Jarka received the Queen's Service Medal for voluntary and unpaid community work for the previous 30 years. In his opinion this award was given to all the Pahiatua children who have given much to this country and who grew up to be good citizens. In 2004, the Polish President awarded Jan Jarka with the Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland.

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## ZYGMUNT KĘPKA

(b. 1930, Osada Morgi, Poland, now Belarus – d. 2018, Hastings)

**A close look at the map of the Milford Track reveals an intriguing Mount Kepka (1781m) amongst the few named peaks in this area of Fiordland National Park. The man who gave the mountain his name was a Polish guide, climber and an accomplished photographer - Zygmunt Kęпка, whose association with Fiordland spans over 30 years.**

Zygmunt, better known amongst his friends and colleagues as Zyg or Zyggy, first came to Fiordland in 1957 as a carpenter working at Milford Sound renovating and expanding Quintin Huts on the Milford Track. When his building contract was completed, Zygmunt became a Mackinnon Pass guide, a role he played for 10 summer seasons.

Born on 7 July 1930 in Osada Morgi, at the Eastern Borderlands of Poland, Zygmunt was nine when World War 2 started. As part of mass deportations of Polish citizens ordered by Stalin the Kęпка family were taken to Karabash in the Ural Mountains where Zygmunt's father and grandfather worked cutting trees in the forest.

Ironically, Zygmunt's love for the mountains started when he climbed Lysaya Gora (the Bold Mountain) in the Ural Range at the age of just 10 in May 1940. The exhilaration of being on top surrounded by beautiful mountain views has left a lasting impression on the boy.

Zygmunt stayed at the Pahiatua camp for two years. At 16 he left to become a carpenter and met Artur Robinson who showed him tramping the Kiwi way. In 1957 the friends were both employed as carpenters in Milford Sound, but when their contracts ran out, Arthur went to Australia and Zygmunt got a job as a Milford Track guide.

While working on the Milford Track Zyggy was captivated by this wild and beautiful land. He climbed, often solo, many of the surrounding mountains and became a bit of a local mountaineering legend. He was the first person to climb Mt Kepka, giving him the naming rights to this peak.



Although he conquered many mountains, Zygmunt saw himself as a photographer rather than a climber. Over the years he amassed a collection of thousands of slides of New Zealand alpine scenery, flora and fauna.

Between his guiding seasons, he worked as a carpenter for the Forest Service and later for the Department of Conservation building back country huts, until he was made redundant in 1990. He stayed in Te Anau for a few more years living alone in a house he built himself. Not being able to find a job in Fiordland he went to Napier, where his brother Marian was running a successful property development firm. Although by that time Zygmunt had reached retirement age, he still did some part-time work for the Department of Conservation in Napier.

Zygmunt never married, he died on 28 November 2018 at the Hawkes Bay Hospital in Hastings, leaving no descendants.

*By Alina Suchanski*





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# ANTONI JAN LEPAROWSKI

(b. Kułaczkowce, Poland, now Ukraine – d. 2012, Christchurch)

Antoni Jan Leparowski (Tony) was born on a farm in Kułaczkowce, a small village in eastern Poland which now belongs to Ukraine. The exact date of his birth is unknown, as no documents recording it survived. He was most likely born in 1936, but in his later life he used the date 12 July 1935 as his birth date. The youngest of four brothers, Tony was just three years old when World War II started.

After arriving in New Zealand, he spent five years at the Polish Children's Camp in Pahiatua, before the camp was dissolved and its inhabitants sent out to different schools in New Zealand.

Tony was fostered by a Christchurch couple Jack and Elisabeth Houlahan. He went to Xavier College, by the Catholic Cathedral, but later was transferred to St Bede's College at the north end of Christchurch. Young Tony showed a great talent for music and while at Xavier received private piano lessons. Following the transfer to St Bede's he became involved in rugby, which he played for many years into his adult life.

As he grew older Tony became increasingly frustrated with others taking control of his life and shifting from place to place like a leaf blown in the wind. He developed a strong desire for independence. In 1952, before he turned 16, he left school and started an apprenticeship as a barber.



After five years of learning the trade Tony saved up enough money to buy his own business – a barber shop in Wairakei Road. He called it “Tony's Gents Hairdressers”.

Tony married a Kiwi girl, Sylvia with whom he had two daughters – Marie and Leeann. Unfortunately the marriage did not last and when the girls were teenagers their parents divorced.

A few years later Tony met Jadwiga, who was visiting New Zealand from Poland. They fell in love and in June 1989 got married. In 1990 Jadwiga persuaded Tony to visit Poland and see his brothers. At that time Leon and Tadeusz were still alive, although Eugeniusz had passed away a few years before, in 1979. The three brothers had an emotional reunion, seeing each other for the first time since they were separated 50 years earlier in Kazakhstan.

Tony worked as a barber for 48 years, retiring in 2005. He died on 6 May 2012 in Christchurch.

By Alina Suchanski

*(In 2013 Alina Suchanski published a book based on Tony Leparowski's life, titled “Alone – an inspiring story of survival and determination”. The book follows Tony's journey from Poland to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Persia, Pahiatua to Christchurch and spans his childhood and youth.)*

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# ZDZISŁAW LEPIONKA

(b. 1936 Lviv, Poland, now Ukraine)

**Zdzisław Lepionka remains one of the most active Polish community advocates.**

From 1979-82 he was the President of the Polish Association in New Zealand (Wellington). In this time he initiated many important projects for Poland, while creating awareness in New Zealand of the conditions during Martial Law in the early 80s and the Solidarity movement.

In 1980, Zdzisław approached the Prime Minister with a proposal to accept 300 Polish refugees who were in a refugee camp in Austria fleeing Martial Law. In November 1981, the first twenty-five Polish refugees arrived in Mangere, Auckland.

On seeing that the situation in Poland was not improving, he initiated and organised a successful fundraising appeal called the „Food for Poland Appeal”. Other activities included creating and organising a public march (attended by over 12,000 people) in February 1982, from Wellington Civic Square to Parliament in support of the Solidarity Movement in Poland.

For over 20 years of his voluntary work, as well as work for the Polish community and Poland, Zdzisław also contributed significantly to the establishment of the very first Ethnic Affairs Council in New Zealand and was elected Chairperson. In this role, he also helped to set up the Christchurch and Auckland Ethnic Affairs Council, and the New Zealand Federation of Ethnic Councils followed. Soon after this was established, he was able to convince the New Zealand Government to establish the very first Ministry of Ethnic Affairs Department (now called the Office of Ethnic Communities).

From 1990-97, Zdzisław was Chairperson of the Refugees and Migrant Service Commission, the official body to the resettlement of refugees sponsored by the New Zealand Government, churches, and the general public.

In 1981, he was one of the initiators of a new ethnic broadcasting service ‘Radio Access’, which gave an opportunity for ethnic communities to broadcast



programmes in their own language, and Polish Radio was born.

In 1981 Zdzisław Lepionka was instrumental in establishing the Polish National Dance Ensemble „Lublin”, engaging Polish choreographer Jacek Sliwinski to teach Polish dancing to children mostly of Polish descent in Wellington. The Lublin Dance Ensemble was very successful and continues performing around New Zealand as well as in Australia.

Zdzisław is one of the best known promoters of the history of Polish Children from Pahiatua and the importance of the invitation of the Polish children by New Zealand Government in 1944, and promoter of friendly relationship and bilateral Trade between NZ, and Poland.

Throughout Zdzisław’s support of Polish activities in New Zealand, his wife Halina and four children were also involved and gave support in Polish spirit.

In 2018, Zdzisław Lepionka was awarded with the Commander’s Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland by the President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda.

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# STANISŁAW MANTERYŚ

(b. 1935, Zarogów, near Kraków)

**Stanisław Manterys was born in a farming village, which had been his ancestral home for centuries. Soon after his family moved to eastern Poland they were deported in 1940 to forced labour in Russia's Komi region.**

He was 12 in early 1948 when he first arrived in Wellington from the Polish Children's Camp in Pahiatua. He boarded in Mt Victoria and attended St Patrick's College. Towards the end of the year he moved into the Polish Boys' Hostel in Island Bay.

Stanisław's elder sister Krystyna, who had been instructed by their dying mother in Uzbekistan to look after her remaining sisters and brother, considered life in the hostel too distracting and that his schooling was suffering. So she prevailed to transfer him to St Kevin's College boarding school in Oamaru.

He later studied bookkeeping and eventually found his career in accounting and business management. In 1963 he married Halina (Polaczuk) and they moved to Auckland. In the 11 years they spent there they built their first house, had three children and were actively involved in the Polish community.

In 1972 they permanently moved to Lower Hutt and remained active in the Polish community, belonging to committees, attending Polish mass in Avalon, sending their children to Polish School and participating in many community activities and festive events.



In 1990 Stanisław visited the mass graves of his parents in Uzbekistan, finally laying some ghosts of the past to rest.

In 1994 he decided to spend his last working years before retirement as a self employed business accountant consultant and moved to a now free Poland to work for seven years.

Since returning to retire in New Zealand in 2001 he remained active in not only the Polish community but also assisted the newer flood of refugee groups coming from eastern Africa.

Stanisław was on the 2004 Pahiatua children's 65th anniversary committee that published the book *New Zealand's First Refugees: Pahiatua's Polish Children*, which was edited and designed by his son Adam. He oversaw its translation into various Polish editions and was numerously invited to speak of his experiences in Poland and New Zealand.

He received two Order of Merit medals from the Polish Government in 2008 and 2016 for "individual contribution and active involvement in the Polish diaspora's matter in New Zealand, continuous promotion of knowledge about Poland and the history of Polish Pahiatua Children".

During all his years in New Zealand Stanisław had considered himself a foreigner. It was not until after returning to New Zealand in 2001 that he truly felt like he belonged there. Though his roots are Polish, he finally considered New Zealand to be his home.

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# JULIAN MAZUR

(b.1937 Poland – d. 2005, Wellington)

**Soon after arriving at the Polish Children's Camp in Pahiatua Julian became ill with tuberculosis and was moved to Masterton Hospital where one of his lungs was operated on and his health improved.**

During this time a young Māori couple, Mr and Mrs Horn, offered to adopt him. It was a 'pleasant surprise' but at that time the Polish refugee children thought they would still return to Poland so he had to refuse the invitation. After being discharged from the sanatorium, Julian returned to the camp but much had changed. There were now only about 40 boys left, with whom he restarted his schooling at Mangatainoka School.

When the camp closed down, Julian and the remaining boys were moved to Linton Military Camp in Palmerston North where they attended St Peter's Marist School. After a short stay in the military camp they were moved to the Polish Boys' Hostel in Hawera. Julian attended Hawera Technical High School where he first began to mix with Kiwi children. This was an enjoyable time, playing rugby and rugby league. While making some new friends there, Julian still tended to hang around with the other Polish boys from the hostel. At the end of the 5th Form he began a mechanics apprenticeship in Hawera, which lasted for five years.

After the apprenticeship Julian immediately moved to Wellington. Most of the boys he knew from the hostel had moved there and so for him the move was natural. By the end of his time in Hawera, he was 'ready for the big city', where he worked on the trams and buses because he'd 'had enough of being a motor mechanic'.

Julian initially shared a flat in Princess Street with some of the boys from Hawera (including Bronisław Pietkiewicz and Jan Lepionka). He then moved to another place in Constable Street with another group of Poles (including Julian Nowak,



Stanisław Prędko, Mieczysław Markowski, Roman Kraj, Stanisław Brejnakowski and Alfred Sapiński) where they 'lived the high life – going to dances, partying at our house, playing cards until the early hours and rugby on Saturday afternoons. We even formed a Polish social rugby team, which played on Sundays, and we always beat the opposition'.

In 1966 Julian married Patricia Denton and they bought a house in Miramar, Wellington. He bought a taxi cab and was 'happy to work for myself. However, on occasions I experienced some anti-feeling as a "foreigner" in Wellington, but this mellowed over the 15 years on the job and was generally limited to the drunk and uneducated'.

Patricia and Julian became the 'proud parents of six children and, because of my lack of formal education and my wife's profession as a teacher, we both agreed that education was to be of primary importance in raising them. They are all well qualified and successful in their careers. New Zealand has provided me with the chance to bring up a family in a safe environment with many opportunities for them to become educated and realise their potential'.

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# CZESŁAWA PANEK (nee WIERZBIŃSKA)

(b. 1933, Chmielów, Poland)

**By the time the camp closed in 1949, Czesława (also known as Czesia) Panek and her younger sister were studying at St Mary's College in Auckland. Her older sister had a job in Wellington.**

Czesława stayed in Auckland and worked at a clothing factory before marrying and having two children. They moved to Oamaru in 1981 because Czesia's sister was living here with her family.

Czesława is a founding member of the Polish Heritage of Otago and Southland Charitable Trust in Dunedin. During the last several decades Czesia very actively contributed to the promotion of historical knowledge about World War II time, not only among the Polish community, but above all around New Zealand, in the form of numerous lectures given in high schools, museums (Dunedin, Oamaru, Christchurch) and in Australia. Her war experiences seen from a child's perspective are the subject of historical publications in Poland and New Zealand.

The historical exhibition about the Polish Pahiatua Children organised at the Otago Settlers Museum in Dunedin a few years ago, which was also exhibited in Poland, was based on Czesia's story. Czesława Panek finds her lost childhood in a series of meetings with children in primary schools, where she teaches them Polish cut-outs and tells them about richness of Polish culture.



Her handmade dolls have been sent to children in countries damaged by natural disasters (e.g. Papua New Guinea, Chile, Samoa) and also to orphanages in Poland. After the earthquake in Christchurch, Czesia accepted into her home a Polish family who lost their house.

For the past 20 years, the Christmas tree that stands in the historic church of Mary Queen of Peace near Dunedin, built by the first Polish settlers who came to New Zealand, is dressed with white doves cutouts symbolizing peace, all hand-made by Czesia. Following Christmas carols everyone takes one Polish cut-out from the Christmas tree and hangs it on their Christmas tree.

Czesia is actively involved in the Waitaki Multicultural Council in Oamaru, where she represents the Polish community with dignity and enjoys undisputed authority.

In 2015, Czesława launched her book "Chmielów: Our Paradise Lost". That same year she was awarded with the Gold Cross of Merit for all her activities advocating Polish history and culture and heritage in New Zealand.

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# JOHN ROY-WOJCIECHOWSKI

Born Jan Wojciechowski

(b. 1933, Ostrówki, near Drohiczyn, Poland, now Belarus)

**After a two-year stay in the Polish Children's Camp in Pahiatua, John Roy-Wojciechowski says he was fortunate to be sent to St Patrick's College in Silverstream where he spent five years. It was a Catholic boarding school that produced many notables in all spheres of life.**

John Roy-Wojciechowski attended Victoria University, where he chose an accounting and commerce degree. He worked as an accountant for numerous companies including Bowden, Bass & Cox (where he met his wife Valerie with whom he was to raise six children), W&R Fletcher and then with GH Mooney & Co, where after four years he became the company secretary. Wishing to progress, he joined the General Electric Company as its financial manager and one year later joined the board as financial director. He then became the managing director for Charles Begg & Co – importers of musical instruments. From early eighties he worked as an independent consultant, company doctor and chartered accountant as well as a chief executive of Mainzeal Group and executive chairman of Mair Astley. Having completed a successful career as an executive, industrialist, investor, property developer, he retired in 1994. In 1998, John Roy was appointed an Honorary Consul of the Republic of Poland, the role he held for the next fifteen years.

He is known as one of the strongest propagators of Poland in New Zealand and of importance of New Zealand's invitation of Polish Siberian orphans for strong and friendly bilateral relations. John Roy-Wojciechowski gained respect in New Zealand - both in the Polish community and the local community in Auckland through decades of work and support he offered. He was instrumental in the establishment of the Otago Heritage Trust foundation, creation of a scholarship for talented young people with Polish roots, initiation of Polish language courses at the University of



Auckland and Polish Literary Club in 1997. John Roy formed the Polish Heritage Trust to teach New Zealanders about Polish history and co-wrote a book about his early life "A Strange Outcome. The remarkable survival story of a Polish child." In 2004 he established the Polish Heritage Museum in Auckland - the only institution of this kind in New Zealand. For many years he has been presiding over the Association of Siberian Deportees in New Zealand.

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the arrival of Polish Children to New Zealand, he founded and gifted to the city of Wellington a commemorative plaque which was unveiled by the then Mayor of Wellington Kerry Prendergast, in the presence of Prime Minister Helen Clark.

In 2017, for his contributions to the Polish Community and the local community in Auckland, and philanthropic activities, John Roy-Wojciechowski was awarded the New Zealand Order of Merit. A year later, the Polish President Andrzej Duda, in Auckland, decorated him with the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland for outstanding contributions to the popularisation of Polish history and for his activities in promoting Polish culture.

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# MALWINA ZOFIA SCHWIETERS

(nee RUBISZ)

(b. 1931, Sokołów)

Malwina, commonly known as Wisia, is one of the co-founders of the Polish Association in Auckland. Since the establishment of the Association, Malwina's purpose was to promote and strengthen its Polish character. She has been organising meetings, performances, and evenings dedicated to commemorating important national anniversaries; arranging papers, articles and presentations, historical materials and exhibitions. Due to her active involvement and dedication she is often called the „guardian of national memory” among Poles in Auckland.

Another of Malwina's prominent activities remains maintaining the memory of the Katyń Massacre. She made a pilgrimage to Katyń, and brought a symbolic clod of soil, sanctified by the blood of the murdered. Today it is kept at a worthy place, along with a plaque commemorating the victims of the Massacre at the Catholic Cathedral of St Patrick in Auckland. It is partly thanks to Wisia that the plaque was originally placed at this prominent downtown Auckland Cathedral.



Malwina Schwieters has been instrumental in creation of the Polish library in Auckland, having gathered about 1,000 items on history, including the history of World War II, fiction as well as materials and archives documenting the life and activities of the Polish community in New Zealand.

From the very beginning Wisia was involved in supporting “Solidarity” (Solidarność) movement. This activity gained special momentum during the martial law in Poland, when Malwina Schwieters actively joined in organising assistance for the interned Solidarity activists and their families, running fundraisers, also among New Zealanders.

Malwina remains very active in the Auckland's Polish Community till this day. In 2016, she published a collection of poems „Głos serca na drogach życia” (The voice of heart on the paths of life).

In 2017, the Polish President awarded Malwina Schwieters with the Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland.



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# JIM SIERS

Born Zbigniew Sierpinski  
(b. 1936 Łuck, Poland – d. 2013, Fiji)

Throughout his life he was known as Bill, Junior, later James and Jim. He became a pioneering landscape and ethnographic photographer, a writer, a publisher, record producer, documentary film-maker and a grand adventurer.

Jim Siers went to school at St Patrick's College Silverstream. Following, he worked as a cadet reporter on The Dominion newspaper. Moving from the daily, he became involved with advertising. He worked in television for a time, and later became a free-lancer. As the sixties continued, he made the decision to focus on writing books and illustrate them with his own photographs.

Soon after they married, together with his wife Judy, Jim Siers established their own publishing company, Millwood Press, which at first they ran from their family home in Ngaio. Some of its first books were Jim Siers' "Hawaii" and "Polynesia", published in 1973. "The New Zealanders", published in 1975, marked a new level of quality for New Zealand market, with design, typography and colour reproduction using the latest technology. Jim's "New Zealand Dramatic Landscape" was published in 1979, then reprinted in 1981 and again in 1983. Together with "New Zealand Incredible Landscape" both books won Tourism Design Awards.

His fascination with the Pacific, and his career as a photographer, began with a trip to Fiji in early sixties to gather material for a travel magazine. For the next decade he moved between Wellington and Polynesia, taking photographs for the 31 books he produced about New Zealand and the Pacific. He later settled in Fiji, where he ran a fishing lodge.

His book "Taratai. A Pacific Adventure" (1977) describes his voyage from Kiribati to Fiji, on a traditional outrigger canoe he built, which meant to re-establish an ancient sea link between the two island groups. His second voyage, in a smaller canoe, ended in near-tragedy when the canoe was wrecked by a big wave, leaving the crew – including



his 10-year-old son Conrad – having to drift for 16 days and nights in an inflatable life-raft before being rescued by a Chilean vessel.

Jim arrived in New Zealand in 1944 together with his brother Ryszard. Their father found them in Pahiataua in 1946. Towards the end of his father's life, Jim acknowledged him as a fishing guide by co-writing a book with him about trout fishing in Taupo. As well as his books and thousands of photos from 30 years of travels through the South Pacific, Jim Siers also left a legacy of recordings of indigenous music and documentary films, including "Vikings of the Sunrise" about his canoe voyages.





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# KRYSTYNA TOMASZYK (nee SKWARKO)

(b. 1932 Vilnius, Poland, now Lithuania)

**Krystyna Tomaszuk's contribution to New Zealand has impacted on local communities in Waikato, Rotorua and Wellington, on New Zealand as a whole, and internationally. Through her life, she successfully contributed to building a strong bond between Poland and New Zealand, representing both, Polish culture and heritage and the best values of the New Zealand society.**

After leaving Pahiatua, Krystyna was educated at Sacred Heart College, Wanganui, St Mary's College, Wellington and at Victoria University, Wellington where she graduated with a BA. From young age, herself and her family have been greatly involved in promotion of Polish language, education and culture in New Zealand.

She is described as the one who has embraced New Zealand's Māori and Pākehā communities and continued to be a Polish person in New Zealand. This includes her achievements in professional life working as the first Polish person as a Māori Welfare Officer and her other community roles. Krystyna's professional life also included Child Welfare, Social Work, Marriage Guidance, Post Primary Teaching, Community Advice, a ministerial appointment as the first lay representative on the Waikato Medical Disciplinary Committee. She was presented with 'Waikato Woman of the Year' award by the Waikato Plunket Society, and award of a Meritorious Service Certificate by the Fairfield Rotary in Hamilton. While working with families on the margins of society, in environments where poverty, violence and crime flourished, she proved to be a significant pioneer in integrated service delivery at grass roots/ community level.



Krystyna has also been involved in a number of charitable projects, such as organising in her holiday home in Turangi a free-to-parents two week school holiday programme for children attending Polish Saturday School in Wellington, a voluntary work in a children's home in Tamil Nadu, India, and in Kalighat, Kolkata, India, at Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying as well as working as a volunteer at Mary Potter Hospice, Wellington. She has been a member of numerous organisations, such as New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, New Zealand Book Council, New Zealand Graduates Women's Association, National Press Club. Krystyna has also been a very active member of the Polish Association of New Zealand and Polish Women's League.

Krystyna Tomaszuk has made contributions to a number of published books. She is also the author of 'But a fleeting moment, meditations on the reality and the mystery of being', published in 1997 and very personal and emotional memoirs *Essence*, published in English in 2004 and in Polish (translated by the author) in 2009. The latter describes not only the autobiographical story of the Polish Children who made a harrowing journey through Siberia and Persia to finally reach New Zealand, but also paints a picture of an important part of New Zealand history as the invitation of the Polish children was the first time ever that New Zealand accepted so many refugees all at the same time in 1944.

In 2013 Krystyna Tomaszuk received the Queen's Service Medal for services to the community. In 2018, the Polish President Andrzej Duda awarded Krystyna with the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland.



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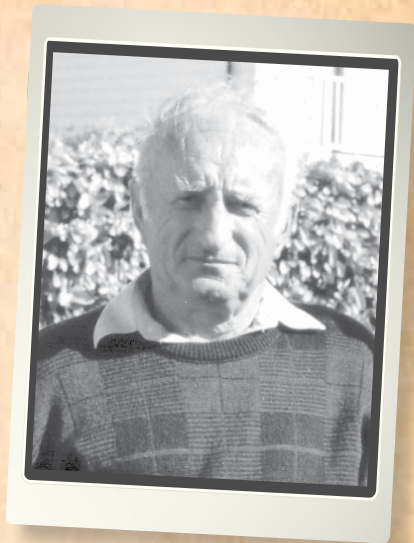
# TADEUSZ WOŚ

(b. 1933 Nowosielce, Poland – d. 2011 Napier)

After four years at the Polish Children's Camp in Pahiatua, Tadeusz and his brother became reunited with their father, now a widower, who had come looking for them at the end of World War II. He was given a job as a blacksmith at the Ruakura Research Farm in Hamilton.

Tadeusz attended Marist School in Hamilton. After a couple of years Tadeusz (also known as Ted) was offered a job in a bakery and left school. The early hours were okay and the tasks manageable, but he learnt quickly that he didn't like working indoors and his health was deteriorating in the bakery environment. So, after two years, Tadeusz got a job roofing and then worked on building sites with a bunch of Polish carpenters. He had found his passion.

Ted loved building houses and was comfortable in the company of so many other Polish speakers. He continued with his carpentry job during the week and began to build on the weekends for himself. The first of these weekend projects that he finished was a house for his parents. Tadeusz continued with this extra work and built another three houses.



In 1959 he went to the Hawke's Bay and ended up working with Marian Kepka, an old friend from the camp, and married his sister-in-law Robin Hallgarth in 1961. Ted worked for Kepka Builders for 32 years and during that time they built a range of houses, from small units to large architecturally designed homesteads.

He made his first visit to Poland at the age of 59. Feeling a bit anxious at first, upon the arrival in Poland, he knew for the first time that he belonged to two countries. They had been back there twice after Ted's retirement but he remained a strong believer that New Zealand was the place where he would happily live for the rest of his life. Ted said he had a very good life.



**Life  
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Pahiatua**

**Text credits**

- *New Zealand's First Refugees: Pahiatua's Polish Children* book
- Barbara Scrivens ([polishhistorynewzealand.org](http://polishhistorynewzealand.org))
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- Białostocki family
- Manterys family
- Lepionka family

**Photos credits**

- Polish Embassy archives
- *New Zealand's First Refugees: Pahiatua's Polish Children*
- Jarka family
- Białostocki family
- Manterys family
- Alina Suchanski (Kępką and Leparowski)

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