

Clint Couchie  
1162 Sandbar Street  
London Ontario

London Advisory Committee on Heritage [LACH]

Chair & Committee

City of London

Dear London Advisory Committee on Heritage, I am writing this letter to request heritage designation for the Polish Hall at 80 Ann Street.

Not many people know the history of this building. It was built by Polish Combatants from WW11 who were not able to return to Poland after its takeover. These Poles were spread around the world and some of them ended up here. Due to not being able to return to their homeland, they build the Polish Hall on 80 Ann St in order to create a home away from their home.

I would love to show you the book about the Combatants that contains biographies of all the Veterans that were involved with the Hall. I have attached a few pages of the history of how these displaced Poles ended up in London.

"Starting in 1946 approximately 400 Polish Veterans arrived in the London area. The SPK Branch #2 was formed on January 1, 1947 when the first meeting was held in the hall of Polskie Stowarzyszenie Narodowe (PSN)/Polish National Association."

We have additional historical biographies and paperwork in the Diocese Archives and within our Book of Remembrance, Traces will Remain of Days Gone By. Peter Fragiskatos & Terrance Kernaghan have copies of this book as well.

I'm sure you have been there and many Londoners have memories or a connection to this building.

This property is important to the local community and cultural heritage. We have a Petition of over 500 signatures of members and non-members who want and are fighting to save the integrity of this hall. It is currently in the process of getting ready to sell. With the prime location, the building will be purchased and torn down by developers. This building and organization means so much to so many people. Good stewardship and conservation should be encouraged. As an avid community member who is proud of my culture and our difficult past, it break our hearts to see another part of our history disappear along with what meant so much to our ancestors. I look forward to working with you to preserve this building and prevent demolition.

Thank you,

Clint Couchie

Attached:

Excerpts from Book of Remembrance, Traces will Remain of Days Gone By

Grandmothers Excerpt from Book of Remembrance

Petition with signature

# BOOK OF REMEMBRANCE / KSIĄŻKA PAMIĘCI

Traces will Remain of Days Gone By / Pozostaną Ślady Dawnych Dni

Biographies of Polish Veterans, Polish Combatants' Association,  
Branch #2, London, Ontario, Canada



## Introduction

On May 7, 1945, Germany officially surrendered to the Allies, bringing an end to the European conflict in World War II. In July 1945, based on the Yalta and Potsdam Agreements, the Allies withdrew their support and recognition for the legitimate Polish Government in Exile in London. On July 9, 1947 the Polish Armed Forces in the west were officially dissolved and General Wladyslaw Anders transferred responsibility for the protection of the Polish Military Standards to The Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, England. As of that date the Polish Armed Forces in the West had ceased to exist and the men and women in those forces found themselves with a very uncertain future.

Approximately 600,000 Poles from the Polish Armed Forces, the Polish civilians who travelled with General Anders Army, children from camps in India and Africa, political and cultural refugees, Poles from German forced labour camps, Poles from German prisoners of war camps, including those who surrendered after the Warsaw Uprising, and concentration camps could not or would not return to a Communist Poland. Some of them knew that if they returned to Poland they faced possible arrest and another imprisonment in Siberia.

Realizing that the Polish Government in Exile in London now had limited authority and very limited ability to act, these Poles understood that they were going to have rely on their own resources. These people faced a very difficult situation. They had fought for almost six years on many fronts only to discover that their country was not free and that they would not be able to go home again. Many questioned what exactly they had fought for and why all the sacrifices. The Polish soldiers asked themselves: "Why did so many of their comrades die in vain?" While most allied soldiers could not wait to go home, Polish soldiers faced a very uncertain future, in foreign lands and far away from home.

At the end of the war members of the Polish Armed Forces were spread across every country in Western and Southern Europe. The Polish Resettlement Corps was formed by the British Government in 1946 as a holding unit for members of the Polish Armed Forces who had been serving with the British Armed Forces and did not wish to return to a Communist Poland after the end of the Second World War. It was designed to ease their transition from military into civilian life and to keep them under military control until they were fully adjusted to British life. For Polish soldiers the Corps was a necessary evil but it also underlined the fact that they were no longer part of the Polish Armed Forces. In order to give themselves some direct control over their futures, Polish soldiers, as early as 1946, began to form associations of Polish Combatants.

Wherever there were groups of Polish Soldiers units of the Polish Combatant's Association sprung up. A meeting of all these separate units was called in August 1947 in London, England for the purpose of uniting these groups into one large organization. The purpose of this organization in the immediate future was to assist Polish Veterans in resettlement into every continent on the planet and in the longer term to maintain and realize in every Polish immigrant community and in every country the idea of an independent and free Poland. For

many of these soldiers the war was not over. The struggle for an independent Poland continued.

In the Fall of 1946 based on agreements between the Governments of Great Britain and of Canada dealing with the resettlement of war immigration, the Canadian government decided to accept Polish Veterans as replacements for the departing German prisoners-of-war who had worked on farms and lumber camps while in Canada. The first group of 1691 Polish soldiers of the Polish Second Corps left from the Falconara Camp, near Ancona in Italy on their way to Canada. The first meeting of the Stowarzyszenie Polskich Kombatantow/ Polish Combatants' Association (SPK), Canadian Branch took place on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1946 in Italy before the soldiers boarded the SS Sea Robin that would take them to Canada. When the first two groups of Polish soldiers landed in Halifax on November 23, 1946 the first executive of SPK Canada also stepped of the ship. The second ship, the Sea Snipe left Italy with 1,185 men on board. Between 1946 and 1947, 4,527 Polish ex-servicemen were resettled in Canada out of a total of 261,000 immigrants who were accepted in Canada during the same period.

In 1959 the global structure of SPK was changed at a world conference when it was transformed into a federation of independent national organizations.

### **Polish Veterans and the Government of Canada**

In 1945-1946, the Canadian government was reluctant to absorb Polish Veterans and refugees that were stranded in Europe after World War II. The International Refugee Organization and the British government began to pressure the Canadian government into accepting more of these people. Canada set up a Senate Committee on Immigration to consider the desirability of admitting more refugees. In July 1947, the Senate Committee on Immigration submitted a report advocating for a substantial increase in immigration.<sup>1</sup>

Although the first responses from the Government of Canada and Canadians in general might be described as frosty it must also be recognized that these relationships began to steadily improve especially as the Government of Canada began to trust more in SPK in Canada. For example, by 1948 SPK was invited to send a representative to attend an inter-provincial conference of ministries of labour and obtained an official charter officially establishing SPK in Canada.

On November 26, 1950 the Canadian Government adopted a more open immigration policy and between 1947-1951, 36,549 displaced Poles entered Canada, including those who were forced to flee Poland during fascist aggression, or were compelled to work as forced labour for the Germans.

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<sup>1</sup> See also "Admission to Canada of members of the Polish Armed Forces." A Brief, Submitted to the Standing Committee of the Senate of Canada on Immigration and labour by the Canadian Polish Congress, Ottawa, June 25, 1946

In 1953, SPK's general meeting was held in Ottawa where the delegates were addressed by several federal cabinet ministers as well as the commanding officer of Canadian forces during World War II, General Crerar. By this time, it is safe to say that the Polish Veterans had been accepted in Canada.

### **Two-Year Farm and Labour Contracts<sup>2</sup>**

Polish Veterans were settled in Canada in every province from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Most came on the basis of two-year work contracts.

Between 1946 and 1947 4,527 Polish War Veterans recruited in Italy and in England were brought to Canada to work in agriculture, factories, domestics or construction. These men were joined later starting in 1948 by others from prisoner of war camps, and forced labour camps in Germany, refugee camps and other demobilization centres. This work was set up through state administered farm contracts for a two-year period. This can be described as unfree wage labour. In an earlier age this was known as indentured labour. This process was implemented to assist Canadian agriculture which was going through a post-war labour shortage. Most of these Polish Veterans were members of the Polish 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps which had fought as part of the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army in Italy. Britain paid for their transportation from Italy. The soldiers were told that if they completed their two-year contracts and if they continued to reside in Canada for another three years they would qualify for Canadian citizenship.

The number of hours of work per week was unspecified although it was understood to be about 60 hours per week. If the soldiers did not live up to the terms of the contracts they would be deported. The soldiers would receive room and board from the farmer that employed them. A recruitment team was sent from Canada to Italy to select the required number of Veterans. The average monthly wage was \$53 per month, which was lower than the average farm labourer wage in Canada at the time.

It must be noted that many Canadians were suspicious of these Polish Veterans, and many of the employing farmers did not treat them well. At the same time, the Veterans saw themselves as soldiers who had fought alongside Canadians for the Allied Cause and did not see themselves as a source of farm labour. To the Veterans their treatment seemed to be unusually harsh and represented an unfair treatment by their allies. To many Canadians they were seen as a strange and thankless foreign element. Men who saw themselves as heroes were treated in a less than a heroic manner. For many Polish Veterans their first years in Canada were very hard, marked by loneliness, isolated from their comrades, doing work they were not prepared or trained for, in a language which most of them spoke, at best, poorly.

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<sup>2</sup> Most of the information on farm contracts is taken from Vic Satzewich, "Immigrants to Canada: The Polish Soldiers of 1946" which appeared in *SPK w Kanadzie*, May 2015 (1/197), p. 41-43 and December 2015 (2/198) p. 34-36.

## **SPK in Canada**

The first branch of the Polish Combatants' Association, Branch #1 was formed in Port Arthur, Ontario; the second in London and the third in Vancouver. In 1948 the first general meeting was held in Winnipeg. The first Executive of SPK Canada was stationed in Winnipeg although the headquarters was soon moved to Ottawa.

In October 1947 there were already 20 functioning SPK branches in Canada. In 1950 there were 23 SPK branches and 1,500 members. In 1958 there were 27 branches. The initial concern included the care and representation for those exploited by unscrupulous employers and aid and advice to members seeking work or accommodation at the completion of their contracts. In 1949 the emphasis shifted to long-term political and cultural matters.<sup>3</sup>

SPK Canada, as an independent organization, was here to function over the longer-term, committed to making a life for Polish Veterans in Canada and encouraging them to obtain Canadian citizenship and to take on the rights and responsibilities of an active life in Canadian society. SPK also became an active supporter of the Canadian Polish Congress and initiated contacts with the Royal Canadian Legion in order to better facilitate cooperation and support between two like-minded organizations.

Beginning in 1955 and expanding on their work with the Fund to Aid War Invalids, the SPK Branches were encouraged to set up local credit union branches in order to further assist Veterans. At the same time many branches undertook to build their own facilities with the first one opening in Ottawa, while the SPK Hall in London opened in 1960.

## **SPK in London**

Starting in 1946 approximately 400 Polish Veterans arrived in the London area. The SPK Branch #2 in London was formed on January 1, 1947 when the first meeting was held in the hall of the Polskie Stowarzyszenie Narodowe (PSN)/ Polish National Association, under the leadership of Tadeusz Sokolowski who was elected the first president. On October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1947 a general meeting was called at which 315 members attend. The main issue at this meeting were concerns with living and working conditions on the farms and with the farm contracts. Farm conditions began to improve after this meeting thanks to the ongoing dialogue between SPK and the Canadian government.

The Branch immediately got involved in cultural and educational activities, such as dances and commemorations of important military historical events, amateur theatricals, film nights, the creation of a library and in 1949 the development of a ladies' auxiliary under President Helena Jedrzejowska. SPK also began to put on shows and food booths at the Western Fair.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Radecki, *Ethnic Organizational Dynamics: The Polish Group in Canada*. (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1979), 83

In the early 1950's a lot of young Polish women and children began to arrive from Polish camps in Africa, India and Germany. In a way this completely changed the dynamics of the membership of SPK Branch 2. Now there were many more women involved, weddings took place and young families were formed and family life and work became an immediate priority for many of the Polish Veterans.

In 1952 SPK received its dominion charter.

A major campaign was launched by SPK in Canada to ensure that the larger Polish communities had access to appropriate spiritual and religious guidance which in most cases meant Polish priests and Polish parishes. In 1953 SPK London Branch #2 committed almost their entire bank balance towards the building of a Polish Church. On September 12, 1954 the new Polish church in London, Our Lady of Czestochowa, was blessed and put under the guidance of a Polish priest, Father Franciszek Pluta.

In 1954, SPK Branch #2 was instrumental in the formation and funding of the Bialy Orzel (White Eagle) Sports Club.

On May 23, 1954 under the guidance of President Jan Pasierbek, a new standard for Branch #2 was christened during the commemoration of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Monte Cassino.

In 1958, the planning for an SPK Hall began in earnest. A committee under the leadership of Stanislaw Pluzak is established to investigate the different options for a permanent hall. On August 17, 1958 land was purchased on which a new hall was to be built and a building committee under the direction of Klemens Macugajlo was established. In the spring of 1960 the ceremonial ground-breaking took place at the location for the new hall and on November 15, 1960 the new hall was officially opened.

Although the credit union was initiated in 1956, on April 7, 1960, the Polish Combatants' (London) Credit Union received its charter. In a few months it has 46 members with share exceeding \$6,000. The credit union began to make loans of up to \$10,000. The first credit union office was located in the church basement, then later land was purchased and a building was built on Horton Street. It closed in 2013.

It should also be remembered that all during this time, out of concern for the preservation of the Polish language with the younger members of the Polish community in London, SPK in partnership with the Polish Parish and the Stowarzyszenie Polsko-Narodowe supported the Polish School (Szkoła Polska im. St. Staszica) in London. SPK Branch #2 was and is an ongoing supporter of Związek Harcerstwa Polskiego / Polish Scouting Association in Canada, Szczep Piastowski Grod for scouts and Szczep Bor for guides in London.

In April 1961, SPK Canada held their 9<sup>th</sup> annual general meeting in London in the new hall.

Although concerts and commemorative programs were held every year, the concert held on September 28, 1963 was exceptional in that Witold Malcuzyński, a Polish pianist of international acclaim gave a Chopin concert in the H.B. Beal Auditorium.

In the mid-60's SPK, Branch #2 established two funds with which to help members and families. The first was the "Fundusz Samopomocy Koleżeńskie" or "Comrades Self-Help Fund" which was intended to provide financial support for any member in need. The second was "Fundusz Stypendialny" or "Scholarship Fund" which provided funds to children of Polish Veterans who were pursuing post-secondary education.

In 1965 under the leadership of Mrs. Człowiekowska, the Ladies Auxiliary provided funding for a new standard for the Girl Guides

In 1966, Polish communities across Canada celebrated the 1000<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Christianity in Poland. A major fundraising campaign took place in order to establish the Canadian Polish Millennium Fund to commemorate this important anniversary.

In 1967 SPK Branch 2 celebrated Canada's centennial and the Polish dance troupe Cracovia appeared in London, Regina and Toronto in order to add a Polish flair to the celebrations.

In 1969 Zofia Arent's symbolic painting showing all the different services within the Polish Armed Forces was unveiled during a major commemoration of the Battle of Monte Cassino.

In 1972 Branch 2 organized "Festiwal Młodzieży" or "Youth Festival" at which Polish dance groups from across Ontario and Montreal performed. Professors from the University of Western Ontario also presented lectures.

In the 1980's SPK Branch 2 sponsored the Krakow Pavilion in their hall as part of the "Cavalcade" multicultural festival (and later Panorama into the 90's), which includes Polish food, folk art, art exhibition and the Cracovia Dancers. You had to purchase a passport and buses would take you to visit the other halls during the three days of Festivities. Saturday included a dance for everyone to attend.

In 1984 a new standard for SPK Branch 2 was christened by Father Mieczysław Kamiński while the Christening Godfather was Edward Stodolski, at Our Lady of Czestochowa Church.

In 1992, members of Branch #2 took part in the "Last March" of Polish Veterans in a symbolic way finally returning to Warsaw and reporting in. At that SPK Canada donated an ambulance to the Centre for Child Health in Miedzylesie, near Warsaw.

In 1997, many Polish Veterans proudly participated in the Queen's visit to London in 1997. Many of them met Queen Elizabeth II during her walkabout in the park.



On November 14, 1998 the Combatant's Monument in black marble, located in St. Peter's Cemetery was unveiled with President Klemens Macugajlo presiding. Jan Pasierbek was in charge of the project.

On October 21, 2006, a program entitled "On Eagles' Wings" was held at the SPK Hall. It was an event organized by children of Polish Veterans intended to bring together several generations. In some cases, four generations were present.

Of course, over all the years since World War II, SPK members have participated in various ceremonies honouring our Veterans and commemorating major events of the wars, such as participating in the annual Remembrance Day ceremonies at the cenotaph in Victoria Park and with the Veterans at Parkwood Hospital, marching in the Veteran's Day Parades at the Western Fair, Heroes Days in Harris Park and participation in VE Day celebrations along with the Dutch Community.

## **Conclusion**

Over seventy years ago Polish Veterans of World War II started to arrive in Canada and many came to London, Ontario. Today most of those Veterans are gone although there is still an occasional obituary outlining the life of a Polish veteran, often accompanied by the picture of a young man in military uniform. The obituary also speaks of their children and grand-children that now live as Canadians. The obituaries of most Veterans cover briefly the military components of their lives, but these few facts tend to somewhat mask the incredible experiences many of these men and women went through as they survived so many events, such as the first battles in 1939 in Poland, exile in the Soviet Union, re-creating Polish armies in France and then England and in the Middle East, and creating such famous units as the incredible Polish 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps, the 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Armoured Division, the Polish Independent Parachute Brigade and further battles at Narvik, Tobruk, Italy and Monte Cassino and Northwest Europe, including Falaise and the list goes on. Some also came from the Polish Air Force which served under British Command and distinguished themselves during the Battle of Britain and the Polish Navy which served during the Battle of the Atlantic, Dieppe and Normandy.

These men and women served their country Poland, but also fought on many fronts for the allied cause and when the war was over, most could not return home. The Polish Veterans who came to Canada were in a sense blessed because they did come to a land of opportunity. Most had to endure two-year farm or labour contracts and then the difficult tasks of learning to live in new land, to learn a new language and customs and through hard work to make their way in Canada. Most of them did well, had families and lived good lives, all the time contributing to the country which adopted them and in which they became proud to live as Canadians.

Those of us who came after them, their children and grand-children, have a sacred obligation to ensure that they are not forgotten; that the memory and life stories of these Polish Veterans are not forgotten. What follows are brief biographies of many of the Polish Veterans who passed through London or settled here and became members of the Polish Combatants'

Association. For some of them we have detailed stories, and for others just brief mentions, indicating that they passed through here, they survived, but all are worthy of being recorded in this “Book of Remembrance.”

**Lest We Forget! Cześć ich Pamięci!**



**SS Sea Snipe: The ship that brought many Polish Veterans to Canada**

## Choinowski-Tabaczek-Soboczynski-Marzec, Maria

Maria Marzec was born August 3, 1923, in Burdykowszczyzna, Poland, now known as Belarus. Daughter of Anna Marzec and pra dzadiu???, eldest of 7 children, (Bronic, Jasia, Tadek, Antek, Statia, Lutek). On February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1940, the Marzec family, along with other Poles were invaded by the Russian Forces and forcibly deported to Siberia. They were lined up against the wall at gunpoint, given 30 minutes to pack their belongings and sent to Baranowicza where they were loaded onto boxcars of freight trains like cattle. For two weeks they traveled without stopping with no food or water until they reached the end of the line. When the train finally stopped they had to continue travelled by foot and sleigh for another 100 kilometers through uncharted brush until they reached the forced labour camps. Hard labour, lack of food and disease were common. Maria fell deathly ill and was unconscious for an extended period of time and was not expected to recover when by a miracle and medicine smuggled into the camp, opened her eyes to rejoin her family.

In February of 1942, 2 years after deportation, the Amnesty opened the borders and the camp was released. Not knowing how long the Amnesty would last, all the deportees made an exodus as soon as they could. The Marzec family found an old abandoned horse and wagon and followed the collective survivors along the frozen river as there were no trails through the forest. The family took turns helping the horse pull the wagon, as the horse was too old and fragile to make the journey on its own. It was a total of 2 months of travel by means of wagon, train and boat, across the Caspian Sea where they arrived in Tehran, Iran. Here they were cleaned, fed and clothed by a Sheik whom opened his gardens to the war refugees. This is where **father Marzec**, eldest brother, and Maria joined the Polish army led by General Anders. Maria under the Polish II Corps Women's' Army Auxiliary Service (WAAS), also known as P.S.K in Polish. She worked in the hospital as a nurse caring for all the sick victims of Soviet deportation. Her Mother, brothers and sisters carried on to a camp in Tengeru, Africa that had been set up by the British for the refugees. In 1944 The WAAS was transferred to II Corps in Italy. As part of the 316 Transport Company serving the battlefields from Monte Casino to Bologna, Maria drove the heavy supply trucks during the Italian Campaign. These supply trucks provided the troops with food, ammunition and other battle related supplies for the 1<sup>st</sup> battle lines.

After the war, Maria and a large majority of soldiers remained in exile and were transported with the company to camp Mepal in Britain to settle. There is where she met the love of her life, Antoni Soboczynski and they were married 1948. It was on that day that her mother and siblings found asylum in England and landed by ship in Southampton, England. After years of being separated, Maria and her husband reunited with her family at the refugee camp. This was the start of a difficult new journey, new camp, new rules and still no food. Eventually, this camp closed and the family moved to Redditch England looking for work and shelter.

In July 1957, Maria, with her husband and 2 children, Elizabeth and Adam, made the decisions to move to Canada and decided to start their new life in Brantford, Ontario. Shortly after, on Dec. 18, 1960 Antoni Soboczynski, died of a massive heart attack. Heartbroken by the loss, Maria accepted the invitation by her sister, Statia, to move to London Ontario. She became a Canadian Citizen in 1963. In 1964, Maria met Tadeusz Tabaczek and remarried. They were together for 18 years and after a long heart illness, Tadeusz died June 6, 1981. Maria Joined the Women's League in 1964 which merged into SPK in 1999. In 1990, Maria married Marian Choinowski. After several years of heart illness herself, Maria died of a massive heart attack on April 1, 2003. Maria was a brave, inspirational and

compassionate lady who spread love wherever she went and left a mark on the hearts of everyone she met. She was an integral part of the Polish community and lived for spending time with her family, especially her grandchildren which were her life.

Her medals: 1939-45 Star, Italy Star, British Defence Medal, British War Medal 1939-45, Kryz Pamiatkowy: Monte Casino.