

Why did the Poles come to Whitchurch? and other questions answered by retired surgeon Andrew Skanderowicz

Andrew Skanderowicz was born in 1949, two years after his Polish refugee parents settled in Coombe Park Camp. His family was one of the first to be transferred from a Nissen hut to one of the newly built council houses in the early 1950s. He left Whitchurch when he was 18 to study medicine in London. Thereafter, he regularly visited his parents in Whitchurch, until they both died. He now visits Whitchurch to see his cousin Anna, who still lives in Manor Road. He has kindly written this article for the Whitchurch Web to mark the creation in 2021 of the Polish Church Memorial Garden.

Summary

During World War II a contingent of Canadian and American pilots lived in Whitchurch in rows of Nissen huts formerly known as Coombe Park camp. When the war finished the Ministry of Defence transferred the huts to Oxfordshire County Council to provide housing for refugees, mostly from Poland, some from other European countries and some British families. The camp subsequently developed into what is now known as Manor Road.

Although conditions in the huts were far from glamorous, people did their best to make them as comfortable and warm as possible. They worked hard to make a life for themselves and their families. The Polish refugees formed their own strong community and central to that was the chapel, or church, formerly on this site. The visiting priest used to come from Reading to hold services, take catechism classes and prepare children for their first Holy Communion. It was traditional on Holy days such as Corpus Christi for processions to be held with young girls walking in front dressed in their Polish national costumes or their First Holy Communion dresses, scattering petals. A timber village hall was built where dances and various events were held. Many of the children attended the primary school in the Goring Heath almshouses.

As time went by, residents moved away, emigrated or moved into the council houses in Manor Road. Numbers attending the chapel diminished, resulting in its closure, deterioration and eventual demolition.

There are now only a few of the former residents in the camp still living in Manor Road, including my cousin Anna Szczeponek who is the only survivor of the original Polish refugees, her parents having settled in the camp in 1948.

What caused the Poles to come to Whitchurch in 1947?

When the Second World War ended, a communist government was installed in Poland. Most Poles felt betrayed by their wartime allies and many declined to "return to Poland" either because their homeland had become a hostile foreign state or because of Soviet repressions of Poles,

Soviet conduct during the Warsaw uprising of 1944; the trial of the Sixteen and executions of former members of the Home Army. Those returning to Poland who outwardly opposed the Soviet regime ran the risk of being imprisoned or even executed.

To accommodate Poles unable to return to their home country, Britain enacted the Polish Resettlement Act of 1947. This was Britain's first mass immigration law. It offered British citizenship to over 200,000 displaced Polish troops on British soil who had fought against Nazi Germany and opposed the Soviet takeover of their homeland.

After initially occupying Polish Resettlement Corps camps located throughout the UK, Whitchurch being one, many Poles settled in London as well as various other locations often in towns close to their camp. Many others settled in the British Empire, forming large Polish-Canadian and Polish-Australian communities, or even in the United States and Argentina.

In the entire history of the world, I cannot think of a worse place to have been a residing native than Poland in September 1939 when Hitler's Nazis invaded. No one in the world can claim to have had an easy time during the war but to be physically invaded by an evil enemy which subsequently went on to commit some of the worst atrocities in history, takes horror to an entirely different level.

The life of every Pole changed dramatically overnight as properties and possessions were seized, imprisonments, beatings and executions became the norm. Every Whitchurch Pole had his and her own horror stories to tell. Despite the gravity of their ghastly experiences few chose to openly discuss them.

What was it like for the Poles in Whitchurch?

When the Poles first came to Whitchurch in 1947 times were very hard initially for everyone living in the Nissen huts. At first the facilities were very basic before running water was eventually installed in each hut. From memory, the winters always seemed extremely harsh. Most survivors will immediately recall just how cold it was during these times when the outside toilets especially were a challenge to any young child who was caught short in the middle of the night; a far cry from the luxuries that we all enjoy today.

Despite the hardships every adult went out of their way to find work, any work, in order to pay the rent and provide food. Many held down several jobs in order to make ends meet. No one dared to be seen depending on Charity or Social Welfare. Men who held prestigious professions, posts or trades in pre-war Poland were reduced to performing menial jobs in order to survive. A large proportion of men and women had their education cut short as a result of the war and being unable to speak English (at least initially) inevitably found work hard to come by. Such was the spirit and will to survive that I vividly recall being told by my mother that the "Rent Man" who called every week to collect the rent was absolutely astounded when every household welcomed him and paid their full rent without fail.

The vast majority of Whitchurch Poles were Roman Catholics and in no time a Nissen hut was converted into a church where a Polish priest came from Reading to celebrate Holy Mass every Sunday as well as honour every Roman Catholic holiday and feast day. In order to maintain and

uphold their Polish traditions, a hall was erected where social events, film shows, parties and stage performances were held on a regular basis.

Over the coming years the Nissen huts were gradually demolished as the Council provided three bedroomed semi-detached houses for the camp residents. As a result of all their efforts and hard work people were eventually able to afford to buy their own properties. Over the years, more families moved away and together with the inevitable deaths among the older inhabitants the original Whitchurch Polish Community was depleted and its existence has now been confined to the annals of history.

Let us keep alive the memory of the Whitchurch Poles

I believe it is vitally important for this beautiful, historic, riverside village to acknowledge and always remember the Whitchurch Poles who, as a result of the adversity imposed upon them by an evil dictator, were forced to abandon their beloved Motherland and seek refuge in a foreign country.

At the same time, it should also be recognised that every Polish refugee was extremely grateful for the welcome and opportunity that England kindly offered them.

Andrew Skanderowicz, August 2021
