

## **The 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first mass deportation of Polish people by the Soviet Union**

Today we are commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first mass deportation of families from Eastern Poland. I will start with the outbreak of the Second World War.

The war started on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939 with the attack on Poland by Nazi Germany. Things were not looking good for Poland, but when on the 17<sup>th</sup> September, Poland was also attacked by the Soviet Union, the situation became impossible. By the end of September, Poland was overrun and divided between the two aggressors.

The treatment of Polish people by the Nazis has been well documented, but what was happening in Poland occupied by the Soviet Union was covered up for a long time.

Right from the start, Stalin's policy was the elimination of the true Polish element from the territories occupied by them.

First let me say a few words about the dreadful treatment dished out to the prisoners of war. Soldiers were sent to labour camps (Gulags) in the depth of Siberia and the officers were separated and brutally murdered in Katyn, Ostaszkow and Miednoje.

The elimination of the 'so called enemies of the state', the Polish Element was to be by mass deportation of families to Siberia and Kazakhstan. These deportations started in February 1940 and continued until June 1941. The first wave was on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1940. Altogether, well over one million human beings were wrenched from their homes and taken into the unknown. The fate of the deportees was hard labour under the most primitive of conditions – **utter misery** – resulting in starvation, diseases and countless deaths.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1941, Hitler attacked the Soviet Union. This prompted the exiled Polish Government to start talks with Stalin to try and change the status of prisoners of war and the deportees. The aim being to organise the army to fight the now common enemy – Hitler. In July 1941, the well known Sikorski-Mayski agreement was signed and in August the so called amnesty was promulgated. The amnesty applied to prisoners of war and to families, and in theory we were free to leave Siberia. General Anders was released from Lubianka prison and appointed Commander of the Polish Army which was to be formed in the Soviet Union.

Yes in theory we were free to leave Siberia, the problem was how. People had no means to buy tickets to undertake the journey south. The situation was desperate and yet many thousands decided to take a chance. The journeys were long and perilous and many perished on the way.

Despite the tremendous difficulties, the Polish Army began to take shape. The condition of those joining the army was pitiful, but improved steadily.

Families who survived the hardships of a very long and hard journey were in an even worse state and the future was very uncertain. The Soviet authorities were not at all helpful, but eventually during the Spring and Summer of 1942, despite all the difficulties, General Anders managed to transport the Army and some civilians into

Persia. Approximately, 150 thousand in total. The army was equipped by Britain and after a very thorough training in the Middle East acquitted itself gloriously in the Italian campaign.

Civilian families in the meantime were resettled in India, Lebanon and East Africa to wait for the end of the war, with the hope of returning home to a free Poland.

The war ended in 1945, but Poland unfortunately, did not regain true freedom and the Polish people had no homes to return to.

In 1946/1947 the army personnel were moved from Italy to Great Britain and later on the families who had members in the Army were allowed to join them. That is how approximately 150 thousand Polish people settled in Great Britain after the war.

**We are some of those people.**

Mr E Borysiuk