



ARTYKUŁ

Polish refugees in “black” Africa

Author: **Janusz Wróbel** 11.12.2023

The Second World War caused huge migration of people. Millions fled their homes in fear of repressions, and millions were the victims of forced deportations. Among those masses, Poles were one of the biggest groups. They found refuge on all continents of the world, including Africa.

The first, small group of Poles came to “black” Africa in August, 1941. They were refugees who fled from the Germans and Soviets to Romania in 1939 and were later evacuated to Cyprus. In the face of the threat from the Axis in the entire Mediterranean Sea region, it was decided they should be evacuated to Northern Rhodesia (modern-day Zambia).

The ship transporting the refugees from Cyprus to Africa stopped on the way at the Palestinian ports, where some of the passengers settled permanently. These included a famous literature historian Łukasz Kurdybacha, writer Melchior Wańkiewicz and a group of former high-ranking officials, including the Stanisławów district governor Tomasz Malicki and the minister of agriculture Juliusz Poniatowski. The group travelling to Africa was joined by around 100 people who had been staying in Palestine until then.

“Cypriots”

The Polish “Cypriots” reached the Beira port in Portuguese Mozambique on August 7, 1941. After they were transported to Northern Rhodesia, they were put in various towns. The only residential area set up especially for them was a complex of several dozen brick houses in Fort Jameston, in the country’s north, at the borders of Mozambique and Niassa. 80 people were put in there. Five, small Polish settlements were established along the main communications trail in southern Africa, which was the railway line from Belgian Congo to Cape Town in the Union of South Africa. 28 people lived in a small hotel in the North Rhodesian capital Lusaka, 25 people in Kafue, 50 in Mazabuka and another 50 in Monze. 12 people settled at a small farm near Monze.

The largest grouping of Poles arriving from Cyprus was in Livingstone, where 170 Poles were put in five different hotels. Apart from the aforementioned towns, more than a dozen people settled in Polish Jesuit missions, which had operated there for several decades. Eight people found refuge in Kasisi, and another six in Mpimpa.



The continent of Africa from the pages of a German geographical atlas from 1942. Published by Baunschweig; George Westermann (from the collections of the National Library).

In total, 429 Polish refugees wound up in Northern Rhodesia, including 209 men, 143 women and 77 children aged up to 17 years old. Considering the newcomers' employment structure, government officials were in the majority — there were 78 of them. Apart from them, there were 52 freelancers and 52 engineers, technicians and craftsmen. Seven priests came to Northern Rhodesia as well.

Most of the men who came to Rhodesia were of older age, hence they avoided obligatory military service. Their high professional qualifications were of no use to the institutions of the Polish government-in-exile since there were no open positions for them. Moreover, the Polish authorities looked unfavourably at some of the "Cypriots" since they were connected with the pre-war ruling camp. In their community, their stay in Rhodesia was viewed as a forced deportation of sorts. Only the arrival of large groups of Polish refugees from Iran to Africa changed the status of the "Cypriots" and opened up brand new possibilities for them.

POLAK W AFRYCE

DWUTYGODNIK POWIĘKOSY SPRAWOM UCHOBIOTWA POLSKIEGO W AFRYCE
WYDAWANY PRZEZ BIUREAU MEN. P. & O. S. W. NAIROBI



The titular page of the Christmas issue of the *Pole in Africa* biweekly (April, 1943), a magazine issued by the Polish authorities for Poles living in Africa during the war. Reproduction from the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance

Refugees from Iran

During the evacuations of Gen. Anders' army from the Soviet Union to Iran in the spring and summer of 1942, more than 40 thousand civilians showed up in Iran, mostly women and children, who were categorised as the soldiers' families. Since Iran could soon become a war zone, the Allies looked for countries where Polish civilians could find refuge until the end of the war. West and South African countries, which were under the British rule at the time, were selected for this goal.

The first transport of Polish refugees came to Iran from Tanganyika (modern-day Tanzania) at the end of August, 1942, and the next waves came in the following months, also to other countries like Kenya, Uganda, Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and the Union of South Africa. In general, more than 13 thousand Polish refugees were put in East Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika) and around five thousand in South Africa (both Rhodesias and the Union of South Africa) between the years 1942-1943.



The Koja residential area in Uganda

Residential areas for refugees were built in Africa, and they were managed by the Polish administration operating under the Polish government-in-exile. They were controlled by the Polish consulates and ministry delegations which were set up in all these countries. An entire education system was set up as well, including pre-schools, orphanages and middle and high schools. There was also a working Catholic ministry. A cultural life developed on a large scale in social clubs and scout teams were created in all neighbourhoods. Most of the Polish residential areas were built from ground up and the local population played a huge role in raising them. The Polish youth was eager to make contact with the Africans, which wasn't to the liking of the British camps' commanders.

Many of the "Cypriots" found jobs in the black neighbourhoods, with the people who got to the "black" continent first. They took the positions of neighbourhood managers, school directors, officials and parish priests.

The African episode of the Polish war refugees lasted until the beginning of the 1950s, when the last large groups of Poles left the continent. Only the Union of South Africa (modern-day South Africa) saw several hundred Poles from the Oudsthoorn neighbourhood stay permanently.

[BACK](#)