Once Upon a War Time

BY HELEN BAJOREK MACDONALD

Pendant les années 1939-41, au moins 1.5 millions de Polonais furent forcés de s'exiler dans les camps de travail de la Sibérie où ils travaillèrent sous le régime soviétique, ironiquement produisant des matériaux de base utilisés pendant la guerre, souvent contre les Polonais. Cet article est basé sur les témoignages recueillis par l'auteure qui a interviewé des femmes et des hommes qui ont survécu.

The opening scene is always the same. I pull into the driveway, shut the engine off then disembark. Open the trunk and like a pack-mule weigh my shoulders down: purse, camera, video camera, knapsack. One hand carries a tripod. The other is free to knock on the door.

She is expecting me. Has probably prepared a meal. Cakes and tea or coffee for certain. I won't leave her house hungry. Only heavy with the burden of her stories and in thought.

She is one of the nearly 40 men and women I have interviewed. In academic jargon, I am conducting primary research which encompasses oral narrative. But I am there for reasons beyond purely academic interest. I am a child of the stories I am collecting. And the work is more than discreet analysis of the subject for the stories that could be my grandmother's or my father's, or my aunts' and uncles' stories. Stories passed down by elders. Experiences worth remembering.

The thesis I am writing will conform to prescribed limitations of analysis and documentation. But the child in me who travels to the homes of strangers—are they?—to collect and document aspects of their lives is all that: a child. Marveling at the miracle of their being; of my being. Living, as in a dream, in those few hours within the realm of nightmare; then reality.

This is the story. "She," who is the subject and who must remain anonymous as required by ethical guidelines for research with human subjects, is a composition of Roman Catholic Poles who arrived at their kindred fates through the years 1939-41 when approximately 1.5 million ethnic Poles[1] were forcefully deported to exile in Siberian labour camps.

Though there is divergence in their narratives and their journeys, the story you are about to read is grounded in fact as told by the now elderly Polish-Canadians. This story correlates the essence of a body of experience, woven as one character. "She" is Eva.

And this is a true story.

Genesis

Once upon a time, she lived in a village in what was then Eastern Poland. Her life was simple, sometimes hard. Yet she was happy for there was food and a small frame house which boasted three bedrooms and even a living-room.

Eva's father was a district policeman; a prestigious position earned while fighting against Tsarist Russia in the glorious battle of 1919–20 and which frequently took him away from home. Her mother was a beautiful woman whose cultured upbringing afforded her an education which she translated into work as a tutor. Sometimes, the locals would ask her to explain the words they could not read: letters from America; papers from the government.

Before Eva was called to the stage, Pani Zaniewska drew her from the wings: "Eva. You must go home. Your Mamma; she is dead."

On the morning of May 12, 1936, Eva's mother went into labour with her fifth child.

"Go to school, Eva" she insisted. "You must sing in the concert. When you come home, you will know your new brother or sister and I will know how proud I am to have such a daughter with such a pretty voice."

Nine-year-old Eva kissed her beautiful mother goodbye and sang all the way to school. "Everyone will cheer for me," she thought to herself, "and *Mamusza* will be so proud when Pani Zaniewska tells her how everyone loves my singing."

Before Eva was called to the stage, Pani Zaniewska drew her from the wings:

"Eva. You must go home. Your Mamma; she is dead."

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It was a procession of aunts that her mostly absent father brought in to care for his four motherless daughters. Summers were spent with Aunt Zosia in Krakow who then sent her sisters and herself home with dresses on which she embroidered posies, and lace-trimmed cotton undergarments which her father declared frivolous.

"Meet your new Mamma," he announced upon their return at the end of the summer, 1939. A few weeks later Germany, then Russia, invaded Poland. And one morning, Eva awoke to her stepmother's unhappy news: "Your

Tatus had to go. The soldiers will come looking for him. We don't know where he is."

Leaving his family was the better choice borne of fear of deportation to Siberia. Eva understood this for she had heard the family stories. Mamma's grandfather was deported under Tsarist edict in 1864. He was never heard from again. Mamma and all her family—Mother, Father, sister and two brothers—were deported in 1906. After Mamma, her sister Zosia, and Grandfather returned to Poland. Grandfather left for America leaving Mamma and Zosia in the care of Krakow cousins. That was how she met Father. And now, Father was gone.

Years later, Eva would learn her beloved father was captured and tried and sent to Kharkov, then executed: an enemy of the Soviet State.

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At the end of the long, narrow village, not far from her home, stood immutably a great old poplar. Nobody knew how old the tree was. "It has always been there," people would say, "watching people come and go; live and die." From a distance, travelers would see it as a beacon of the village. And from the tree, the road traveled south to where *Tatus* had fled.

At the base of the tree, someone had carved a small hole into which Eva would crawl. For hours, she would watch, still as the roots that were her perch, for the figure of the man that would be her father coming home. And she would pray; "Please, God, let my *Tatus* come home."

Years later, Eva would learn her beloved father was captured and tried and sent to Kharkov, then executed: an enemy of the Soviet State.

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Exile

"Get up! Get up! We are taking the family of Josef Buczek," shouted the Red Army soldier over the barrel of his gun.

"Eva, hurry. Put your clothes in the pillow cases. Help your sisters," cried Eva's stepmother.

"What did I do?" she pleaded with the soldier. "I didn't do anything. My husband is not here," all the while, stuffing *kasha* and flour and pots into a sack.

"You are going! So pack what you can take!"

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For three days since they were rudely disturbed from the deep sleep of that frigid February night, 1940, they remained packed as sardines with 65 others in the boxcar. Whole villages of ethnic Poles had been rounded up that night. Nobody knew for certain the why's but their lips whispered the dreaded destiny: Siberia.

Already, food was scarce. Children cried. Women cried. Old people prayed. And pubescent Eva suffered her first indignity: squatting at the hole chopped by an axe out of the wooden floor of the boxcar. Even the blanket held around her by her stepmother gave little comfort.

A few days after the train left the station, they stopped. When the boxcar doors slid open, the glare of sun off the snow blinded the frightened travelers. Fresh cold air collided with the stench of misery and sickness.

"*Kipietok!*" shouted one of the soldiers. Hot Water.

"Take this pot Eva," urged her stepmother. "And remember which wagon you are in."

Eva's inert legs winced at the weight of the child they carried when she stepped into the knee-deep snow.

When Eva returned with the pot full of warm water, a soldier was at the door of the boxcar dishing out fish soup and hard black bread. For the moment, happiness swelled within her belly.

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"Mamma! Mamma!" a child's voice screamed, waking everyone in the boxcar.

"What's wrong with you?" demanded an impatient voice.

"I can't move, Mamma. I can't move."

Eva watched as the woman climbed the makeshift board bunk located on the other side of the boxcar.

"*Matko Boska!*" cried the woman. Mother of God, "Janusz, bring the axe!"

From her cocoon, Eva watched as the young man chopped cautiously away at the wall of the boxcar.

"Shhh. Shhh." soothed the woman as she held her child steady and still against the wall, trying to calm the sobs of fear and pain.

When he finished, the woman sat with the girl wrapped inside her arms and a blanket, singing and stroking the child's disheveled head. And Eva could not take her eyes off the chunks of bloodied flesh and curly whisps of hair frozen as scrapings off the hide of a pig to the icy boxcar wall.

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Twice during the month-long journey through the Siberian wilderness the travelers disembarked from the train. Groups of people were bundled into sleighs and Eva watched as they disappeared into the *taiga*. The dead were stripped of their clothes—for everything counted—and left in ditches at the side of the tracks.

And Eva's only brother was born to a mother whose breasts were empty. Naked into the misery of the world.

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At Krasnoyarsk, the family of Josef Buczek was unloaded from the train and directed to waiting sleighs. All day and into the night they traveled over the snowy floor of the *taiga* 'til they arrived at a settlement. Eva's stepmother made the sign of the cross over her bosom and drew the family of Josef Buczek into her arms.

"We must stick together," she told Eva and her sisters, "and God will take care of us."

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Ten families shared the barrack; one family to a room. Makeshift bunk beds were built into the walls, as in the boxcar. The only other furnishing in the narrow log building was a large stove which offered warmth and a place for cooking.

The day after their arrival, the Commandant of the camp came to speak with the new arrivals: "Tomorrow, you start work. You don't work, you don't eat. Children under 14 will go to the village to attend school where they will learn in Russian language to be good citizens."

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There was no time for explanation. How to explain? And so the next day, Eva and her three younger sisters, Jadwiga, Mietka, and Rosalia, said their good-byes to their stepmother whom they would see only rarely; for to survive—to eat—she worked through the summer in the forest where she collected resin from the pine trees and, during the winter, in the mill splitting slabs for use by steam-powered, wood-burning trucks. In the orphanage in the village, God was absent but there was milk and occasionally meat. Lessons well done were rewarded with candy. Eva and her sisters were quick learners of their lessons and in the ways of survival.

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"Shhh, Jadwiga," hissed Eva to her impatient sister. We must wait a little longer and then we can go back to the orphanage."

Each evening, Eva and Jadwiga stole away from the orphanage to take their hiding place behind the village tavern. They would return to their younger sisters carrying potato scraps, bread crusts, and bones from which they could suck the juices.

In the short summers, when not washing floors or their meagre clothing or tending to other chores, the Buczek sisters ran to the river where they picked sour red berries which stained their hands and lips. With the other children of the orphanage, they would descend on the forest with baskets and knives, harvesting mushrooms for soup and to be dried for winter consumption.

The quest for food was all-consuming. Eva forgot what a full belly was. When Christmas, 1940 came, there was no traditional *Wigilia* celebrated at the orphanage. It was another day of endless days of cold and hunger.

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Exodus

"Eva, listen. We must go from this place before the winter comes," confided her stepmother. "We are free. I will come back for you in two weeks. Pack your sisters' clothes in a sack and save whatever food you can."

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August, 1941. Word had found it's way to the remote camps throughout the Siberian hinterland that the deported Poles were given "amnesty" from their exile to forced labour; they were free to leave. Hitler's invasion in June had sent the Red Army fast retreating after suffering heavy losses. Wanted: soldiers.

Stalin made a pact with the western Allies (including the Polish Government-in-Exile located in Great Britain) in which they agreed to unite to fight the common enemy: Hitler and Nazism. Able-bodied Polish men were to enlist in a Polish Army which was assembling under the British Eighth Army in the Middle East. Families would be permitted to follow, later.

Another winter in a Siberian labour camp was not a welcome prospect to the Poles. But the exit window was very small. Winters came early and harsh, and the battered Poles had virtually no means of leaving. Even less inclination for staying.

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The train station was as crowded with Poles as their bodies were thick with lice. Two days passed before a train arrived. Two days of waiting and scratching and praying for food and imploring with God to save them.

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"Mamma, Rosalia is too hot. I can't sit with her," Eva told her stepmother.

The day after their arrival, the Commandant of the camp came to speak with the new arrivals: "Tomorrow, you start work. You don't work, you don't eat."

"There is no place else to sit. We have to stick together."

This time they were paying passengers. This time, they sat in seats and through the window Eva could see the country, mile-by-mile, falling behind as a snake sheds its skin.

When the train stopped, hungry passengers disembarked to seek out food. Fourteen-year-old Eva was given a few rubles by her stepmother.

"Bring some bread and some milk if you can find some. Be quick! And remember which wagon to come back to."

There was no question that her stepmother would remain to care for the weak and feverish Rosalia. But when Eva returned, she caught a glimpse of her stone-faced stepmother hurrying along the tracks to the back of the train. In her arms she carried a pitiful bundle wrapped in the blanket in which Rosalia had been enfolded. Eva watched as she handed it over to a man standing next to a wagon full of similar bundles.

Weakened by hunger, the squalid masses of fleeing Poles had begun to succumb to illness and disease: typhus and diphtheria. Like flies, they dropped along the trans-Siberian rail lines. And there were no burials. No goodbyes.

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As shadows of wayward children, the ravaged Poles migrated south: by raft, by rail, on foot, or by whatever means could be secured. Upon arrival in Tashkent, the wretched masses were conveyed as raw material along a

production line: they were relieved of all clothing and possessions which were burned, shaved of all body hair, bathed in delousing solution, then issued clothing collected by the Red Cross from distant places only imagined: England, Canada, America. And as fretful stock-keepers, Polish officials and international refugee personnel catalogued the names of those who arrived and of those left behind.

Able-bodied men were sent to Palestine where they enlisted in the Polish Second Corps under the leadership of the distinguished General Wladyslaw Anders. Following a year's training, most were transported to Italy where they would either perish or become heroes in the final scenes of the bloody war.

Eva, her two surviving sisters, Jadwiga and Mietka, and their stepmother were channeled through the Red Cross to the Tengeru settlement camp in Tanzania (one of 22 in British Africa established for the Polish survivors of Siberian labour camps) where they lived a diasporic existence until 1949. There, Eva and her sisters returned to their interrupted education in classes taught by Polish teachers, themselves victims of war and displacement.

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Exordium

June, 1949. Yet another delegation from the International Refugee Organization (IRO) called camp residents to a meeting.

"No matter what they try, we are not going back to Poland. Agreed?" whispered Eva to her sisters who nodded their agreement. After the war, some of the displaced Poles returned to Poland: mostly those who had family to return to. A home. But for most, everything was lost. The Allies traded Eastern Poland to Stalin and for the dislocated Poles, their homeland had fallen into treacherous Communist hands.

Before the meeting commenced, one of the women stood and plainly shouted: "We are not going back to Poland! We will not! We know what it is to be under those Communists. We do not want to go back to Siberia!" Everyone cheered.

"Please listen to what I have to say," implored the woman from the IRO. "Please."

After a few glances across and throughout the room, silence fell.

"We have a ship that can take some of you to Canada. There are jobs and Canada is a growing nation that needs good workers."

Eva could scarce believe her ears. Canada! A job! Whatever anyone else wanted to do, this was her ticket.

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"Family Name?"

"Buczek."

"How many?"

"Four."

"How old?"

"Stepmother, 35. I am 22. Two sisters; Jadwiga, 20 and Mietka, 19."

"No men?"

"No."

"There is work for domestics. You must sign contract. You will not be working at the same place."

"Will we be close?"

"No guarantees. And, your stepmother. She is too old."

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It was a tearful goodbye. Eva's stepmother had family in Poland. She had a home to return to. And so it was decided she would return. Through the tears it was agreed they would keep in touch. Perhaps she would visit Canada one day.... Perhaps.

Within a month, Eva and her two sisters were on a train to Mombassa, Kenya, where the *General H.M. Black* American naval carrier was moored. And all she knew about Canada was that it was the large pink mass on the map and what she had read in a Polish-language book; that Canada was a land of forests where the sap ran thick and sweet.[2]

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Epilogue

Had Eva seen the newspaper a few days after her arrival at the DP camp in Ajax, Ontario, she would have read the following:

> More than 5,000 men, women and children have passed through the village since it became a stopping place, resting quietly while the Department of Labor determined their qualifications and decided where they could be happily placed....Carefully screened, these farmers ... and healthy young women, the pick of their countries, will take their place in the Dominion and do their part to make a bigger and better Canada. ("5,000 Immigrants Handled At Ajax in Year" 4)

Breeders and workers. And this is what Eva did. After fulfilling her one-year contract as a domestic in a hospital where she laundered and mended linen, Eva married a Polish ex-soldier whom she met at the wedding of her sister, Jadwiga. Four children were born to them and though Eva stayed home cooking, cleaning, and caring for her family, she helped supplement the family income for she was an excellent seamstress. She has always been active in the women's organization at the parish church and these days she takes care of her grandchildren who live just a few blocks away.

All told, living happily ever after; for as Eva will tell you, Canada is paradise.

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At the end of the emotional interview, I tell the old child

who sits drained before me: "Thank you very much for sharing your experiences. I'd like to ask one more thing before we conclude. Do you tell people about your experiences?"

"No. Well, sometimes, if somebody is interested. But, no. It's too hard. And people don't believe. Who would believe such a story? Maybe you because you are like my children. But how could someone who is born in Canada imagine such a thing? No.... Who would believe?"

The author thanks Sue McIntosh Larsh for her literal eye and editorial touch.

Helen Bajorek MacDonald is a Masters candidate at the Frost Centre for Canadian Heritage and Development Studies, Trent University, Peterborough where she is conducting research on the topic of Post-World War II Polish immigrants to Canada who are survivors of forced deportation and exile to Siberian labour camps during WWII. *Her work has been supported by Ontario Graduate Scholarship and scholarships from the Adam Mickiewicz Foundation in Canada, the W. Reymont Foundation, and the Canadian Polish Millennium Fund. She dedicates her work to her Babcia, Wiktoria Rosalia Kotowicz Bajorek. Helen's most recent publication is "Grand[M]Other Tongue" which appeared in the anthology,* Our Grandmothers, Ourselves *(Raincoast Books, 1999).*

[1]This figure may never be adequately determined, even if/when researchers are granted adequate access to Soviet archives. I have chosen to use a figure of 1.5 million Poles deported by the Soviet Union during the period 1939–41 as a "middle ground." Anders, Davies, Gross, Piotrowski, Jolluck, Sword, Thurston, and others posit numbers ranging from 980,000 to 2,000,000.

[2]The book, *Kanada Pachnaca Zywica* [Canada Smelling of Resin] by Arkady Fiedler, was read by a number of Poles before their arrival in Canada.

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ELISAVIETTA RITCHIE

Road-Building Instructions

—for Jessie Elspeth Curtis

Make it straight
through the briars
Leave it dirt
no matter if hollows
hold puddles
I want to sit
on my back steps
shelling peas
stringing beans
thinking poems
watching the child
on the fat-wheeled bike
waver and splash
all the far way
open the gate
keep the geese in
rule cows out
reach in the box
stuff my mail
in her saddlebags
shut the gate
pause to pick
raspberries
bramble—and black—
lose count
then slowly
feet muddy
mouth purple
letters intact
wheel home

Elisavietta Ritchie's poetry appears earlier in this volume.