CAPTURED, DEPORTED, HUMILIATED, VICTORIOUS...

The incredible tale of the Poles who fought back

In 1940, thousands of Poles were deported to Siberia and left to rot in Stalin's gulags. Four years later, they were taking the fight to the Nazis in Italy. **Monica Whitlock** has spoken to some of the survivors of a wartime odyssey

Accompanies a BBC World Service documentary on 'Anders' army'

Standing proud
Polish civilians and soldiers stand side by side for Holy Mass in Kyrgyzstan, 1942. Survivors of the Soviet invasion of Poland, they went on to form an invaluable army in the struggle against Germany

IWM MH 1815

Behind the Jala photography shop in Isfahan, Iran stands an old outbuilding. It is filled with boxes of glass negatives taken by Abdolqasem Jala, a brilliant photographer in the middle of the 20th century. The plates, surprisingly intact, include portraits of Polish people who found refuge here during the Second World War.

Most of the negatives show women and children, including some of the 13,000 Polish orphans who lived in Isfahan. A few of these orphans are still alive. "To us, Iran was a paradise," remembers Henrika Levchenko, who married and settled in the Middle East. "People were so kind. Iran was a wonderful place, after everything we had been through."

Henrika is one of around 1 million men, women and children deported from Poland by the Soviet authorities in 1941. They were sent to labour camps in the USSR and later dispersed around the world, founding the Polish communities that we know today, from Tel Aviv to London to Melbourne. For decades, the story of their odyssey was hardly known. In Poland, it did not fit the wartime narrative generated under communism. Abroad, immigrants finding their feet had neither time nor appetite to look back. Many deportees concealed their stories even from their own children.

This missing history is now emerging, through the testimony of survivors and evidence scattered around the world. A pile of gramophone records, a cinema poster, a suitcase of letters – all are clues being assembled by scholars and by a new generation of Poles eager to make sense of their past.

Poland pulverised

On 17 September 1939, Soviet troops invaded Poland – 16 days after Nazi Germany launched its deadly strike, devastating the populations of western Poland and pulverising Warsaw. Under the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, the latter laid claim to the eastern borderlands. This region comprised prosperous cities like Vilnius, Białostok and Lviv, surrounded by forests and farmland.

The diverse population included a high proportion of Jewish people, swelling by the day as Jewish families from across Nazi-occupied Europe fled east.

Danuta Gradosielska was 14 years old when she was deported and sent to work in a gulag

Rounded up

Within weeks of occupying eastern Poland, the Soviets started arresting local people by the tens of thousands to prevent potential resistance.

Danuta Gradosielska, now of Forest Gate, London, was then a farmer's daughter in Rivne. She was 14 when the NKVD, the Soviet political police, knocked at the door at 6am on 10 February 1940. Danuta remembers raised voices as the Soviets ordered her parents to be ready in half an hour. The family took what they could – food, warm clothes and blankets – and bundled on to a sledge.

Hundreds of families were gathered around Lyubomyrka station. "We were put on a cargo train," recalls Danuta. "Seventy-two people in each wagon. There was a hole in the floor for a toilet. There were planks to sleep on, like shelves. I climbed up to the top plank and lay looking out through a grating. When we crossed the border out of Poland we all sang the national anthem, *Poland Is Not Yet Lost*. I watched Russia going by: just empty spaces and snow."

The journey was brutal. "The guard would throw the dead babies into the snow," recalls Danuta. "When an adult died, they'd put the body on a platform by the engine. When the train slowed, they'd push them off. But the children they just threw away." Elizabeth Piekarski from Vilnius remembers a mother with two boys stirring grain over a camping stove. "The children drew closer and closer. The train jolted and the little one fell into the stove. He burnt to death. The guard grabbed his heel and swung him out of the door."

Unknowable numbers of the elderly, the ill and young children were dead by the time the trains reached Siberia two weeks later.

The Memorial Society of Krasnoyarsk records four deportations arriving in Siberia from February 1940 to June 1941. First came the officers of the Polish army, forestry workers and farmers with their families. Then followed fugitives, including Polish, Czech and Austrian Jews. Families of prisoners came next and then Ukrainians. The Polish deportees spent the next 18 months in labour camps mainly in Siberia and Kazakhstan.

Elizabeth cannot bear to think of all the bitter labour she endured as a teenager. Once she was detailed to cut reeds in a marsh. "They left us with no food for two weeks. Nothing. So one of the boys climbed a tree and pulled some baby birds out of their nest. We tried to warm them in marsh water before we ate them."

Elizabeth's younger sister was sent down the coal mines in Karaganda, where only small children could squeeze into the tunnels. She survived an underground explosion that left shards of coal in her body for the rest of her life. But the corrosive dust that coated her lungs would eventually kill her.

Danuta and her family were sent into silent forests where they were put to logging, living in huts that had been part of the old gulag. There was no perimeter wire as there was nowhere to run. Many simply died of hunger. Danuta remembers one nearby family with seven children, all but one of whom starved to death.

Beaten and burned

The stories of Elizabeth and Danuta represent hundreds of thousands of others. Deportees young and old carried notebooks and sketch pads in which they described and drew their experiences. One bundle of drawings and writings comes from Edward Herzbaum, discovered in a suitcase by his astonished family only after his death.

Edward, aged 19, was alone. He was Jewish and his mother had sent him east for his protection. When the NKVD picked him up in Lviv they burnt him with cigarettes, beat him and sent him to a gulag camp near Yaroslavl. Edward cheated death time and time again. "I cannot surrender to these pigs," he wrote. "I will not die among those thugs who would then laugh. When we go to hell, nobody will ever know how we died."

But then everything changed. Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, smashing the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. The Polish deportees, at a stroke, became Soviet allies.

"Suddenly a rumour spread through the crowd about some kind of agreement with the Polish government, concerning the creation of a Polish army and the releasing of all war prisoners and inmates," wrote Edward Herzbaum. "How wildly happy I would be to go to the front, to die there, but not here."

The Polish prime minister in exile, General Sikorsky, chose General Władysław Anders to lead this implausible army out of the USSR. Anders was in prison in Moscow. Released,

Our map shows some of the locations on Anders' army's gruelling journey across Europe and Asia

ABOVE: **Polish deportees released from labour camps wait in the Soviet town of Buzuluk to enlist in the newly formed Polish army, 1941**

RIGHT: **Troops are inspected by General Sosnkowski, commander-in-chief of the Polish forces, accompanied by General Anders, 1944**

BELOW: **Polish women on guard duty in Iraq, c1942. Female members of Anders' army also drove trucks loaded with ammunition and supplies**

RIGHT: **Edward Herzbaum, aged 19. His record of the horrific treatment of deportees was found after his death**
ABOVE: **Edward's painting of the assault on Monte Cassino, 1944**

IWM MH 1843/GETTY IMAGES/MAP ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL HEWITT–BATTLEFIELD DESIGN/KRESYFAMILY.COM/USHMM, WASHINGTON

The Poles in their **hundreds of thousands were crammed into trains** for a journey 2,500 miles south

he headed for central Asia on the southern Soviet border. The Poles in their hundreds of thousands crammed into trains for a journey of up to 4,000 miles south. Many died of typhoid on the way. Uzbek villagers recall opening the train doors and the corpses toppling out like logs.

Danuta, now aged 16, made it to Tashkent. She added two years to her age and joined up. She embroidered a white Polish eagle on her uniform and stuffed her huge boots with straw so they would stay on.

The army that mustered near Tashkent was like no other in modern times: soldiers, many in their teens, with all their dependants and more than 10,000 orphans. All these people were famished, typhoid-ridden and disorientated.

The blazing beauty of central Asia intensified Edward Herzbaum's unhappiness. "We will regret the fine days, the sunshine and our young years. We should somehow keep it in our memory, but we can't… one day maybe we will want to recreate it and we won't be able to."

Surviving superstars

Other Poles stranded in the USSR joined in. Among them was the fabulously talented musician Henryk Wars. Henryk had scored 50 or more of the biggest films in prewar Warsaw. The Nazis had rounded up many of his circle, including the brilliant dance-music composer Arthur Gold. Arthur would be murdered at Treblinka. His brother (also Henryk) escaped and joined Anders, along with Henryk and other surviving superstars.

General Anders led the Poles across the Soviet frontier in the spring of 1942. Approximately 115,000 people boarded creaking barges at Krasnovodsk and chugged across the Caspian Sea to the Iranian port of Anzali. For 639 Poles this was the end of the journey. They were brought ashore dead, or they died on the beach.

The British Army was ready to meet the Poles with mass disinfection tents and lorries for the journey to Tehran. From there the

Polish troops scrambled to the summit at Monte Cassino and **raised their flag over the rubble**

Troops of the II Corps throw grenades during their successful assault on Monte Cassino, 1944

non-combatants were sent mainly to Isfahan. Some of the orphans would later move on to India and east Africa. Military and medical staff trained in Tehran before travelling to Iraq and then Palestine to join the Allied north African campaign.

Finest hour

Danuta became one of 600 or so Polish women and girls in the all-female 316 Transport Company. "I drove a three-tonne Dodge. I was very small so I folded a blanket and sat on it so I could see over the wheel. The men were amazed to see us girls driving the lorries." Danuta delivered ammunition, petrol, food and troops all over Egypt.

Several hundred Jewish Polish soldiers left the corps in Palestine, including the future prime minister of Israel, Menachim Begin. These people joined the community of Poles who had left for Palestine before the war. "All the cafes and bars were Polish and they all wanted to treat us," remembers Elizabeth. "It was like home, like being in Poland."

Edward Herzbaum wrote: "We have become a little closer to the world in which we used to live before the war and therefore we are now more like our old selves in the time before Russia, but it doesn't mean that I'm closer to my past. The opposite is true… The way I am now, I don't fit into this old world any more and I fit into the new one even less."

The Poles served in Egypt, from where they sailed to Sorrento to take part in the Italian campaign, under the title of the Polish II Corps. For many of these men and women, what happened next become the defining moment of their wartime lives. They were dispatched to Monte Cassino, where the armies of many Allied nations had fought three battles to break German positions around a Benedictine monastery perched on a rocky hill. Monte Cassino anchored the defensive Gustav line and so guarded the road to Rome.

The fourth battle, General Sir Harold Alexander's Operation Diadem, was intended to encircle the hilltop, prising out the Germans from the valley beneath. The role of the Poles was to isolate the monastery and push around it until they connected with a British force. General Anders led his men into battle with a shattering artillery bombardment on the night of 11 May 1944. The week-long battle that ensued has been described as a Verdun in miniature, with ferocious fighting, some of it hand-to-hand, at Snakeshead Ridge above the monastery.

Despite ferocious German resistance, the Polish and British armies connected on 18 May, the Poles scrambling to the summit and raising their flag over the rubble. But their victory had come at a huge cost – the II Corps had lost more than a thousand men. Elizabeth, a Red Cross nurse, served throughout Monte Cassino, doing what she could for the injured and dying. Casualties came in so fast that the ratio to nurses was 100 to one.

Monte Cassino went down as General Anders' finest hour. Poland was occupied, broken, in ruins. But in Monte Cassino the battered Polish flag still flew.

Few of the II Corps returned to Poland to live after the German surrender in 1945. The Yalta conference had severed eastern Poland and absorbed it into Soviet Ukraine and Lithuania. All plans, all futures were derailed.

Few families emerged unscathed. Danuta's sister Zosia had died of pneumonia in Siberia in 1940. Edward Herzbaum's mother perished in the Łodz ghetto in 1943. The Soviet NKVD murdered Elizabeth's father at Katyn, although this was not acknowledged until 1990. In some families no one was left at all.

Danuta Gradosielska pictured today in London. Few of the deportees returned to Poland after the war

Life after war

The Poles set out to make new lives. Some sailed to the United States, others to Australia, Canada or South Africa. The composer Henryk Wars went to the US, resuming his career, with the support of Ira Gershwin, scoring films for Colombia, Universal and Twentieth Century Fox.

Danuta married a Polish officer in Italy. They set off to Britain where she brought up six children and where she still lives.

Elizabeth was demobbed in Scotland. "They gave the men a suit and the women got a length of material," she said. "And that was it! Goodbye, all the very best."

Edward Herzbaum also headed for Britain, where he became an architect. "And now I am close to the end," he wrote. "It seems strange that this letter will one day go out into the fog – a long, long way – and one day you, so far away, will read it." H

Monica Whitlock is a radio journalist specialising in the former USSR. She worked for the BBC for 20 years as a correspondent and producer

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RADIO

▶ A BBC World Service **documentary on Anders' army**, presented by Monica Whitlock, will be broadcast on 15 July

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