

Trails of Hope. The Odyssey of Freedom

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Exposures

It is estimated that about a million Poles live in the Land of Maple Leaf, and Toronto itself is the largest concentration of our countrymen in Canada - over 220,000 people declare Polish origin.

Initially, migration from Poland was not of a mass character and very few people came to Canada. The first recorded Polish immigrant in Canada was Andrzej Wilk, the son of a Gdańsk merchant, who sailed to Québec in 1686 on board the "La Minerve" ship. As a result of the collapse of the Polish state in the 18th century and failed subsequent uprisings, the number of Canadian residents with Polish ancestry grew. The outbreak of World War I and the rebirth of the Polish state did not stop migration to the Land of Maple Leaf. Canada was an attractive country for Polish workers. Economic immigration from Poland concentrated in the provinces of Manitoba, Ontario, Saskatchewan and Alberta. The vast majority of migrants worked in agriculture.

Immigration to Canada was intensified by the outbreak of World War II, which led to the recruitment of future soldiers who, like the Haller's Army in the past, were to fight for the Polish cause. As a result of negotiations of the Polish government in exile, from May 1941 to May 1942, the Tadeusz Kościuszko Camp operated in Owen Sound where soldiers were trained. As many as 1,036 people passed through it. After training, those soldiers joined the Canadian and American army.

It is worth mentioning that the Tadeusz Kościuszko Camp was not the first military camp in the history of Polish soldiers in Canada. In the years of 1917-1919, the camp for soldiers recruited in North America by the Polish Gymnastic Society "Sokół" operated in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Over 22,000 trained soldiers joined the Haller's Army in 1919.

Interestingly, the former member of the Haller's Army, General Bolesław Duch, was overseeing the recruitment. He officially acted as the Commander of the Polish Forces in Canada and the Representative of the Supreme Commander in Canada and the United States of America. Colonel Arciszewski was waiting for him on the spot with a group of already enlisted volunteers: 6 officers and 146 soldiers. Service in the army was to unite the Polish community in the New World. Many recruits were sons of World War I and Polish-Bolshevik war veterans:

I have one son, but I lay him at the feet of our
martyred Poland, and he must be a soldier, if
not today, then tomorrow. I was 13 when I was
sent to the most dangerous place in 1920,

recalled Konstancja Godlewska from Montreal

in a letter to General Duch.

While in Canada, Poles were involved in various projects aimed at sustaining the spirit of the nation oppressed by the occupiers. In 1943, the Polish Scientific Institute was established with the aim to preserve Polish thought, scientific heritage and tradition abroad. It was also here that the Canadian Polish Congress was established in 1944. In addition, various types of collections were organised and efforts were made to reach compatriots in Europe.

After the end of World War II, the Canadian capital also played an important role, as it became a refuge for Poles who fled Europe and never came to terms with the sovietisation of Poland. Among them were veterans of the Polish Armed Forces (including Gen. Kazimierz Sosnkowski) who created various organisations associating soldiers, such as the Polish Army Veterans' Association in America. An important task for them was to preserve the memory and uphold historical truth. Therefore, thanks to the efforts of the Polish community in 1980, the Katyn Memorial was unveiled in Toronto to honour the victims with dignity and to remember about the crimes of the communist perpetrators.

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Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe

Mateusz Iżycki de Notto (1898—1952)

Brigadier general, pilot, commander of Aviation and Anti-Aircraft Defence of the Warsaw Army.

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